

# Philosophy at the End of the World

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As this issue moves to press in the summer of 2023, climate change is ever-present and inescapable. July 2023 stands to be the hottest month ever recorded, with both land and sea temperatures surpassing all previous records.<sup>1</sup> Climate scientists warn us, yet again, that these extreme temperatures are not anomalous. Recent heat events are the consequence of human-induced climate change and will be common occurrences in the following decades.<sup>2</sup> This increasingly stark reality poses challenging questions, particularly for education. What might education do, if anything, to help shift such patterns? How might we—as educators and parents—explain such realities to young people? How do we prepare ourselves and our students to live on a warming, even dying, planet?

In this issue's lead essay, Bryan Warnick offers an unflinching exploration of these questions, asking: "What does education look like at the end of the world?" Warnick highlights the political challenges of global climate change, noting that the problem is "slow moving, with dispersed responsibility," requiring "sustained global cooperation for decades," all requirements that hit us at our "weakest points, cognitively and politically." While acknowledging that some kind of "unprecedented solution" is at least a remote possibility, our future world—the world our children will inherit—will likely be one of "widespread suffering, turmoil and chaos." How can we prepare our children for this future? What does it mean to inhabit a dying planet?

There are no simple answers, of course. But, several essays and responses in this issue squarely consider such questions. Warnick explores four possible educational responses to the end of the world: (1) focusing on survival skills and self-reliance, (2) turning to the *apatheia* of Stoicism, learning to face the end of the world with detachment and equanimity, and (3) embracing the joys of the present moment, and (4) engaging in all-out climate activism. He does not make an argument *for* any one of these responses but explores the limits and consolations of these potential choices. At the same time, Warnick

argues that collective work on potential climate solutions should be part of the way forward, even if those activist efforts may likely fail. Given this chance of failure, we should also give children “tools and perspectives that might be useful as they live under difficult circumstances: skills to endure a harder life, perspectives allowing for equanimity in the face of difficulties, a sense of having fully appreciated the planet as it died.” In her response essay, Claudia Ruitenberg points to how finding a sense of “peace among the ruins” might offer not just peace, but a “positive view of a new future.” Reckoning with the end of the world, may require “radical shifts in our conceptions of the good life,” and the *relinquishment* of certain practices, assets, behaviors, and beliefs that contributed to this environmental crisis. Living in these ruins may allow such relinquishment not to be seen merely as a loss but “as the substantive ground of new forms of flourishing.”

René Arcilla opens his essay, “What calls for critical pragmatism?” with a similarly stark diagnosis of our environmental and political crises:

Our planet is on fire and all we do is fight. In stark summary, this is the predicament in which our society finds itself. Sci-fi writers can scarcely conjure up a more dire, all-encompassing emergency. Yet instead of rising to the occasion, we have been steadily destroying our capacity for a democratically cooperative response.

This urgency demands that we overcome our indifference, and act effectively, and soon. Arcilla takes up the potential strengths of the critical pragmatist tradition, a stance that, in the words of Barbara Stengel, asks us to “take action seriously.”<sup>23</sup> Arcilla engages in a sympathetic critique of this tradition, pointing to its affordances, but also limitations, including the cultivation of a kind of critical disenchantment with the world. In contrast, Arcilla calls for a supplemental, qualitatively different approach: an *educational poetics of wonder*. Such an approach prioritizes figurative language over conceptual, asking us to linger in moments of wonder in the way that “ordinary, inconsequential incidents can strike us as miraculous.” This approach may also ask us—as democratic citizens—to consider how our lives and educations are bound up with many others, including those

who do not agree with us. Arcilla reminds us that a poetics of wonder might allow us to grasp not only “what would be lost if we let the planet burn,” but also the miraculous infinity of our fleeting, wondrous planet.

Juliette Bertoldo opens her essay, “Thinking with Death,” against the backdrop of “another sweltering season of anthropogenically-driven mega-drought, flash floods, wildfires, poisoned waters, species decimations.” She takes this reality as a starting point to rethink education’s relationship with death, asking how we might learn *with* death rather than “against it.” Drawing on emerging, interdisciplinary resources, including contemporary environmental humanities scholarship, Bertoldo urges us to accept mortality and not avoid the inevitability of death. Such a stance, she argues, asks us to be in a different relationship with the “more than human” world that shares our fate on this precarious planet. Such a relationship might activate “an ethos of ‘earth-based solidarity’ whereby one can feel the hospitality of an earth to be shared and reinvented,” allowing us to reimagine what should be encompassed in the idea of a shared, public world.

In her essay, “In Praise of Not Knowing,” Jennifer Logue explores the taken-for-granted assumption that knowledge—and building shared knowledge—is an uncomplicated goal worth pursuing. Instead, she focuses on the allures and complexities of ignorance, particularly “the strategies people use to deny traumatic realities and avoid change—even when their lives depend upon it.” She reminds us that many complex social problems—including climate change—will not necessarily be solved by more or better information. And indeed, offering more information—especially from the standpoint of judgment and superiority—may prove counter-productive, serving to alienate rather than facilitate learning. In addition, knowledge does not often produce action. In place of knowing, she turns our attention to the potential power of “not-knowing” and the complexity of our emotional worlds. As she argues, mobilizing a “‘knowing ignorance’ might be a viable strategy with which to facilitate dialogue across difference in this context of polarization, apathy, and defensiveness (and maybe even inspire the requisite collective action needed to save ourselves and the world).”

In sum, these essays focus on the need for action, but also the complexity of what might prevent us from doing so, and the potential found when considering the difficulty of pathways forward. As is true of our field, this second issue covers a wider range of conceptual ground, posing other important questions about thinking and cognition, play and socialization, reflecting and knowing, fascism and politics. Yet, amid these diverse essays and responses, I was struck by the many authors who drew our attention to the consequences of a warming world.

These questions feel newly resonant and particularly sharp. But they are also part of a longer tradition in philosophy to inquire into the inevitability of death. As Michel de Montaigne famously wrote, “to philosophize is to learn to die.”<sup>24</sup> Montaigne was quoting Cicero, who was himself imagining Socrates awaiting execution. Such preparation for death need not lead to despair but rather, for Montaigne, to a kind of freedom. As he writes, “those who have learned to die have unlearned to live in servitude.” Montaigne’s essay, peppered with aphorisms and poems from Lucretius, Horace, Ovid and others, urges equanimity in the face of death. Such composure might be found in recognizing the short impermanence of human life, especially when considered against the wider sweep of history:

And if you have lived a day, you have seen everything. One day equals any other day. There is no other daytime, no other nighttime. This sun, this moon, these stars, this constellation, they are the very same ones your ancestors enjoyed and the same ones that will sustain your great-grandchildren.

Here, Montaigne is referencing Manilius’s *Astronomica*: “Your fathers saw none other, nor will your grandchildren look at anything different. (*Non alium uidere patres, aliumue nepotes*).” Peace in the face of death may come when thinking about how our world will continue without us. Later in his essay, Montaigne writes, “I wish for us to be doing, and to carry on with our responsibilities in life while we still can. I want death to find me planting my cabbages, indifferent to it, with my garden still a work in progress.” This, of course, is the consolation that catastrophic climate change steals away. Our gardens, our forests, our

oceans may not continue beyond us, or not in the same way for our children and grandchildren.

There is no easy optimism. But in thinking together about these realities—and how we might find a way to live with, and perhaps through, them—philosophy offers certain consolations. If anything, philosophy of education, as a field, may, in embracing these questions, connect with the questions our students are asking, and the challenges we will all face in the century ahead.

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## REFERENCES

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- 2 Zachariah, M., S. Philip, I. Pinto, M. Vahlberg, R. Singh, F. Otto, C. Barnes, and J. Kimutai. “Extreme heat in North America, Europe and China in July 2023 made much more likely by climate change.” DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25561/105549>
- 3 Barbara S. Stengel, “The Useful Joy and Joyful Use of Critical Pragmatism,” in *Philosophy of Education 2019*, ed. Kurt Stembagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020), 22. <https://doi.org/10.47925/75.2019.021>; cited in Arcilla, “What Calls for Critical Pragmatism? An Introduction to Educational Wonder,” this issue.
- 4 Montaigne, Michel de. *Essais*. Edited by Marie de Gournay. Paris: Abel l’Angelier, 1598.