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The Value of Climate Despair

Leonhard Menges, Philosophy, University of Salzburg, Austria, leonhard.menges@plus.ac.at

Hannah Altehenger, Philosophy, Umeå University, Sweden, hannah.altehenger@umu.se

Given the current and future suffering associated with human-made climate change and the lack of political action in response to it, it seems only natural to feel despair. However, despair has a bad reputation among climate ethicists and in the wider public. In this paper, we will push back against this view and argue that there is considerable value in climate despair. More specifically, we shall maintain that climate despair can be valuable in two respects. First, it is epistemically valuable because it constitutes a particularly apt way of recognizing the severity of what has already happened and is likely to happen because of human-made climate change, and because it can provide a "reflective break" that allows us to rearrange our values and find new strategies to tackle climate change. Second, climate despair can have various valuable expressive and signaling functions. Most importantly, perhaps, it can send the message that the despairing person cares about important *moral* values and norms, and remind us all of how big a moral problem climate change, in fact, is.

The Value of Climate Despair

Leonhard Menges
Philosophy, University of Salzburg, Austria

and

Hannah Altehenger
Philosophy, Umeå University, Sweden

Climate change is already happening. Many people have died or lost their homes, jobs, or loved ones because of droughts, storms, floods, desertification, and other events that are, most probably, closely causally related to human-made climate change. Moreover, given the current political situation, it is likely that the future will bring much more climate change-related suffering and death. According to many studies, the measures that states and companies are currently taking are not enough to avoid severely harmful climate change.[1] Thus, the outlook is bleak. It seems natural to feel despair in reaction to human-made climate change, the associated suffering, and the lack of political action. However, many climate activists, scientists, philosophers, and politicians say that despair is a bad thing, or that hope is the right attitude.[2] This is the background of the article. The main question we will be concerned with is this: Is there anything valuable about responding with despair to human-made climate change and the way the world is currently trying to deal with it? We will argue that there is. More precisely, we will argue that what we will call climate despair is valuable in at least two (heretofore underappreciated) ways. First, climate despair is epistemically valuable since it constitutes a particularly apt way of recognizing and deeply experiencing the world as it is and can provide us with a "reflective break." Second, climate despair can have significant expressive and signaling value.[3]

It is important that our main claim that climate despair is valuable not be misunderstood. We do *not* argue that climate despair is the best response, all things considered, or that one should feel climate despair. Whether one of these additional

[1] See, e.g., Calvin et al. 2023.

[2] See, e.g.: Williston 2012; McKinnon 2014; Mann et al. 2017; Monbiot 2019; Moellendorf 2022; Marsden 2024; and Guterres 2024.

[3] Huber (2023) and Nguyen (2024) have also maintained that climate despair can be valuable. We will come back to their positions and how they relate to the claims put forward in this article below (see Sections I.B and II).

claims is true depends on many contingent factors that we will not be able to discuss here. However, we do want to offer some form of validation to those who are experiencing climate despair.

The article is structured as follows: in Section I, we will present the phenomenon we will be concerned with in more detail. In Sections II and III, we will present the two ways in which climate despair can be a valuable response. In Section IV we will discuss possible objections.

I. WHAT IS CLIMATE DESPAIR?

In this section, we will first offer a rough, general account of despair (Section I.A). Based on this, we will then provide an account of climate despair (Section I.B).

A. Despair: A Sketch

The nature of despair is an interesting but somewhat under-discussed issue.[4] However, before we present our account of despair, a caveat is in order: what we shall offer in this subsection is primarily meant to be a characterization of the sort of response we are concerned with, rather than an attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for despair. We do maintain, though, that the response we will describe captures a *kind* of despair.[5]

To begin with, we assume that despair is an emotion. As such, it typically has a (i) representational, (ii) phenomenological, and (iii) behavioral aspect.[6]

(i) *The representational aspect*: In despairing, (a) one desires that an event (or state of affairs) *e* not occur and despairing, then, involves the thought that

[4] Empirical researchers have also noted the scarcity of research on despair (see, e.g., Shanahan et al. 2019, p. 854; Loewenthal and Gee 2020, p. 1070; and Bird et al. 2024, p.748).

[5] Extant philosophical discussions of despair often approach the topic in an indirect way: they take *hope* as their starting point and then seek to construe an account of despair by demarcating it from hope (see, e.g., Govier 2011; Huber 2023; Kwong 2024; Chignell 2022; Nguyen 2024). We will not follow this approach for two reasons. First, the relationship between despair and hope is itself an object of controversy. While some have claimed that despair *precludes* hope (e.g., Steinbock 2007, p. 447; Meirav 2009, pp. 217–128; Govier 2011, p. 247), others have claimed that despair *presupposes* hope (Kwong 2024, pp. 235–6). Second, in offering an account of despair which takes hope as its starting point, one runs the risk of arriving at a somewhat "sanitized" account of despair, which downplays despair's phenomenological dimension (see, e.g., the accounts presented in Meirav 2009; McKinnon 2014).

[6] For overviews see: Deonna and Teroni 2012; Scarantino and de Sousa 2021; and Brady 2024.

e will either very likely or even certainly occur or has already occurred, or, alternatively, (b) one desires that *e does* occur and thinks that *e* will very likely or even certainly *not* occur.[7] Moreover, despairing of an event *e* represents *e*'s occurrence—or non-occurrence, respectively—as very negative and as involving a great loss (or losses).

(ii) *The phenomenological aspect*: Representing that an undesired event *e* will very likely or even certainly occur (or, alternatively, representing a desired event *e* as very unlikely or even impossible to occur) comes with pain. Despair is not a hedonically positive state and not even a neutral one. It clearly involves suffering.[8]

(iii) *The behavioral aspect*: Despair typically involves shifts in one's motivation. When it seems that a certain event *e* that one desires *not* to occur will very likely or even certainly occur (or, alternatively, that an event *e* that one desires to occur will very likely or even certainly *not* occur), then one will often cease to act in ways that would prevent (or promote) the occurrence of *e*. Thus, despair is often associated with inaction and withdrawal.[9]

The three aspects we have focused on so far are not exclusive to despair. Sadness, disappointment, and grief, for example, have very similar representational, phenomenological, and behavioral aspects.[10] Indeed, it seems plausible to us—though we need not commit ourselves here—that despair, disappointment, and grief are specific forms of sadness, and that they all include representing an event or state of affairs as involving a very likely or actualized loss, pain, and tendency to withdraw. However, we want to suggest that despair can be distinguished from these other responses by the fact that despair is, by its very nature, an *intense* emotion.

To elaborate, one can be a bit disappointed with somebody or experience moderate grief (e.g., about the death of a distant relative), but there is no such thing as "weak despair."[11] More specifically, despair's intensity can manifest itself with respect to any

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[7] See, e.g.: Chignell 2022, p. 58; Huber 2023, p. 83; and Kwong 2024, p. 237.

[8] We agree with Kwong's (2024, p. 241) claim that "experiences of despair can be especially torturous."

[9] See, e.g., Govier (2011, p. 241). Despair does not always lead to inaction, though. We will elaborate on this point in Section IV.A.

[10] See, e.g., the accounts of disappointment by: Draper 1999; Dijk and Zeelenberg 2002; Martinez et al. 2011; Brady 2010; Menges 2020; and Telech and Katz 2022.

[11] Notice, though, that this claim is still compatible with the view that despair can come in degrees (Kwong 2024).

of the three aspects just mentioned: (i) despairing of the fact that a certain event *e* will very likely, or even certainly, occur (or has already occurred) represents *e*'s occurrence as *very negative*—e.g. as *horrible*–or, alternatively, as an actual or anticipated loss of *great* importance. Relatedly, despairing typically goes along with (ii) *severe* suffering and, finally, (iii) often entails a *strong* loss of motivation.

There are different kinds of despair and different ways of distinguishing between them.[12] In the remainder of the article, one distinction will be especially important, namely that between what we will call *anticipated* and *actualized*-loss despair. In the case of the former, the intentional object of one's despair, that is, the event that one represents as very negative and as involving a great loss—for example, losing one's home—is a *future* event. In the case of actualized-loss despair, by contrast, this event and the loss(es) it involves *has already occurred*. While the philosophical discussion has largely focused on anticipated-loss despair, some theorists have also discussed actualized-loss despair.[13] Let us next turn to climate despair.

B. Climate Despair

We use the expression "climate despair" to refer to a specific form of despair. Its distinguishing feature is its representational aspect: it represents human-made climate change as one of the crucial causes for why certain very negative events either (i) have already occurred or (ii) will very likely, or even with certainty, occur and for actualized or anticipated losses of great importance. Take first, the climate change-related version of actualized-loss despair. In late October 2024, heavy rain in the region of Valencia, Spain, caused the death of more than 200 people. In the town Paiporta, for

[12] See, e.g.: Huber 2023, pp. 84–85; Kwong 2024, p. 237.

[13] See, e.g., Huber (2023, p. 85) who calls it "resignative despair" and Kwong (2024, p. 232) who calls it "hopelessness." An anonymous reviewer has suggested to us that we should furthermore distinguish between cases of anticipated-loss despair, in which the agent represents the occurrence of a desired event as *impossible,* and cases in which they "merely" represent it as *very unlikely,* among others because these cases supposedly differ significantly in their phenomenology. However, it seems to us that these two cases are phenomenologically very similar: Suppose that A represents *e*'s occurrence (say, the death of a loved one) as very negative and as involving a great loss, while simultaneously believing that it is impossible that non-e occurs (that is, it is *impossible* that the loved one will survive). Being in this state will, plausibly, involve severe psychological suffering. But the same, in our view, holds for the case where A represents *e*'s occurrence as very negative and as involving a great loss, while simultaneously believing that it is very unlikely that non-e will occur (that it is *very unlikely* that the loved one will survive). Rare cases of "incorrigible optimists" aside, it seems plausible that these cases will feel very similar to the person concerned.

example, the mayor reported that six people died in a nursing home because the water rose so quickly that the staff could not rescue everyone.[14] Empirical studies suggest that heavy rain and flooding of this kind are closely linked with human-made climate change.[15]

Now, imagine a person who thinks seriously about what happened in Valencia, about how much the world has known about the causal connection between greenhouse gas emissions and extreme weather for decades, and about how little humankind has done to prevent events of this kind. It would not be surprising to respond with despair: the person represents the events in Valencia as very negative (e.g. horrible); it seems to her that it will be impossible to realize some of her important desires related to people, places, or things in the region in the future, which constitutes a great loss for her; she moreover represents the event as the causal outcome of human-made climate change and humankind's failure to fight it; she withdraws and loses motivation; and she suffers severe pain. This would be a case of *actualized-loss climate despair*. The event over which one feels despair has already happened and there is no uncertainty about the fact that one will have to live with it.

Now take the climate-related version of anticipated-loss despair. Imagine someone from Kiritimati, the world's largest coral atoll, located in the mid-Pacific, who loves her home but fears that she will have to leave because of rising sea levels and the corresponding floods.[16] She grew up on the island, most of her friends and family live there, but it seems more and more likely to her that living conditions on the atoll will become unbearable. This would be a huge loss for her. As a result, she withdraws, loses motivation, and experiences severe pain. This is a case of *anticipated-loss climate despair*.

Now we can formulate the main question of this article in a more precise way: what, if anything, is valuable about actualized- and anticipated-loss climate despair? This more precise way of stating our main question also makes it clear that, unlike certain other theorists, we will not be concerned with despair understood as a *global* response. These theorists say, for example, that despair involves "the conviction that everything is wrong and nothing will turn out well," a total exhaustion, akin to nihilism, or "the utter loss of any ground of hope."[17] Instead, we follow theorists like Catriona McKinnon, Jakob Huber and Anh-Quân Nguyen in being concerned with a kind of despair that is directed at a specific *class* of despair-inducing events—those having to

[14] See Kent and Brown 2024.

[15] See Calvin et al. 2023, fig. 1.

[16] See Alexis-Martin et al. 2019.

[17] Govier 2011, p. 247. Williston 2012, p. 171. Steinbock 2007, p. 447.

do with human-made climate change.[18] We should also mention that our focus is not individual agents' despair over their own powerlessness with respect to human-made climate change, i.e., over the fact that individuals (seemingly) cannot do anything about it.[19] Rather, the focus is on feeling despair over the actualized or anticipated harm or suffering caused by human-made climate change and the actual or anticipated failure of humankind to stop it. The question of this article is: what, if anything, is valuable about this kind of climate despair? This is the question we will turn to now.

II. THE EPISTEMIC VALUES OF CLIMATE DESPAIR

In this section, we will defend the view that climate despair is epistemically valuable. To begin with, recall that we assume that despair is an emotion and that emotions in general involve representations.[20] Like beliefs and perceptions, emotions constitute a particular mode of mentally "giving uptake to features of the world."[21] In contrast to

[18] See: McKinnon 2014; Huber 2023; and Nguyen 2024. Our examples have focused on despair over specific, relatively local negative events caused by human-made climate change. One can also experience climate despair with respect to more global developments (e.g., the massive increase in heat-related deaths caused by human-made climate change) or abstractly described states of affairs (e.g., the massive increase in avoidable human suffering that results from human-made climate change). In fact, it seems plausible to us that many of those who experience climate despair also and sometimes even primarily experience climate despair of this "more abstract" kind. Many thanks to Leonie Eichhorn for bringing this point to our attention.

[19] See, e.g., McKinnon (2014); for a related view, see Nguyen (2024). According to Nguyen (2024), climate despair and despair more generally are intimately connected to *feelings of powerlessness* and a *lack of agency*. More precisely, Nguyen (2024, p. 252) maintains that in despairing, we represent a situation as being "closed off to intervention." We agree that despair will often involve feelings of powerlessness. We also find it plausible that despair may involve the representation that a situation is "closed off to intervention," although we reject Nguyen's assumption that it always does. Nguyen's claims seem particularly pertinent for cases of what we call actualized-loss climate despair, because here the agent thinks of the horrible climate change-related event they are despairing over as already realized such that they cannot do anything about it. However, we also assume that *anticipated*-loss climate despair is a real and philosophically interesting phenomenon. In these cases, the despairing agent does not represent the horrible climate change-related event as already realized and need not represent it as being (entirely) "closed off to intervention." Instead, they may still think that there is something that they can do to prevent its occurrence (while being aware that chances of succeeding are very low).

[20] See, e.g.: Goldie 2000; Roberts 2003; Prinz 2004; and Döring 2007. For an overview, see Scarantino and de Sousa (2021, secs. 5, 6, 7).

[21] Macnamara 2020, p. 460.

beliefs and perceptions, however, emotions necessarily have an evaluative dimension. We can form the neutral belief that a person died, but when we have an emotion regarding someone's death, then the death appears to us as something bad (the death of a loved one) or good (the death of someone who threatened our lives). Due to this built-in evaluative dimension, emotions are particularly apt mental states to represent values and disvalues: When an emotion represents an object correctly or fittingly as good or bad, then experiencing the emotion is (non-instrumentally) epistemically valuable because it is a way of recognizing and deeply experiencing an evaluative feature of one's situation.[22] Grieving over a friend's death, for example, is a particularly good way of recognizing and deeply experiencing the great loss that is realized by the death.

Let us now apply this line of thought to climate despair, turning first to anticipated-loss despair. Consider the person from Kiritimati again who despairs that her home islands may become uninhabitable because of human-made climate change. Above, we suggested that anticipated-loss despair involves the representations that certain very negative events will very likely or even certainly occur and that this will involve a great loss. In the case of Kiritimati, this is, unfortunately, true. Current climate science indicates that living conditions on small islands in the Pacific will become harder and that climate change is already driving displacement.[23] Moreover, we can stipulate that for the person from Kiritimati, leaving her island will frustrate many important desires and thus constitute a great loss. Leaving the specific person's perspective aside for a moment, Pacific islands have, at the very least, great aesthetic value and immense instrumental value for flora, fauna, and human culture.[24] Thus, their going extinct would be a great loss even for those who do not live there. Now recall that despair is, by its nature, an intense emotion. To feel despair over something does not represent it as mildly bad. Anticipated-loss despair (typically) involves the representation that something *very* negative or even horrible will happen. Given that it would be very negative, even horrible if islands with rich cultures become uninhabitable or even sink, feeling despair over it clearly seems *fitting.* More specifically, just as in the case of

[22] We adopt the term "recognition" from Goldie (2000, pp. 28–37; see also Helm 2009). The fittingness of emotions can be understood in different ways. The "dominant view on emotions is that they are representations of core relational themes or formal objects" (Scarantino and de Sousa 2021, sec. 10). As representations, they can be correct or incorrect. Fear, e.g., fittingly represents a shark next to you in the sea as dangerous and it unfittingly represents a harmless spider as dangerous. For a non-representational account of fitting emotions, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2023, ch. 7).

[23] See Calvin et al. 2023, sec. A.2.5.

[24] See: Worland 2019; Alexis-Martin et al. 2019.

grieving a friend's death, it seems to be a particularly apt way of recognizing and deeply experiencing the badness of the situation the person from Kiritimati is facing.

So far, we have focused on a single example. But the point generalizes. As climate science tells us, the probability that horrible events will happen because of human-made climate change is very high and anticipated-loss despair has this representational content. By feeling this kind of despair, we can recognize and deeply experience how dire the future, in fact, looks. And this is of non-instrumental epistemic value.[25]

As we will argue next, the same holds for *actualized*-loss climate despair. This kind of despair has an even worse reputation than anticipated-loss despair, since, after all, the event that one desires not to have occurred has already occurred and the losses it involves have already been actualized. Huber has called this resignative despair and refers to Han-Pile and Stern when he says that this

> attitude, they quite plausibly argue, is irrational; if I was hoping to have sea bass at my favourite restaurant, but it turns out there were none at the market today, I should (as a matter of rational consistency) not despair, but simply order something else.[26]

Perhaps, this is true for hoping to have sea bass. But it is very plausibly not true for many other hopes. When you have hoped and desired to live your life together with your friends and family in the house you have built close to the river you love, and then your loved ones die and your house is destroyed by a flood, it may be rational in the very thin sense of "being internally coherent" to simply abandon your old hopes and desires. However, there would be something very odd, cold, and even frightening about a person who wakes up the morning after the catastrophe with a new set of preferences that fits nicely with reality. By contrast, it would be wholly understandable to stick to your old hopes and desires for at least a certain period of time and to despair. Moreover,

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[25] Nguyen (2024) also argues that climate despair can be fitting, but for a different reason than the one we stress. According to Nguyen, despair in general is fitting iff it correctly represents a *loss of agency*, and this, he furthermore argues, is true of climate despair. This is so because of various structural features of the climate crisis, such as the dispersion of cause and effect when it comes to the harmful effects of our emissions, the scale of the crisis and our proneness to moral corruption in the face of it (see Nguyen 2024, pp. 252–55). Nguyen additionally maintains that climate despair can provide us with valuable knowledge, both about "how our agency can be inhibited by structural features of a situation" and about "the true scale and nature of climate change and how difficult it is to prevent catastrophic climate breakdown" (Nguyen 2024, p. 258).

[26] Huber 2023, p. 85.

showing this reaction would also be internally coherent in a more substantial sense of the term, namely, of being in line with and an expression of what one cares about "deep down" (on this point, see also Section IV). But despair would not only be understandable and coherent in the sense just explained. Importantly, it would also constitute a way of recognizing and deeply experiencing the awfulness of the thing that happened, which will now shape your life. Let us elaborate.

In the case we imagined, something obviously horrible has happened to the despairing agent and important future-directed desires of hers will be unrealizable because of human-made climate change. One way to recognize and deeply experience the bleakness of the situation is to respond with despair. Its representational dimension fits exactly the state of affairs the agent is confronted with: the loss she experiences is huge, which corresponds to the intensity that marks despair. Thus, in the case at issue, actualized-loss climate despair is a particularly apt way of recognizing and deeply experiencing the badness of what happened to the agent because of climate change. And this is non-instrumentally epistemically valuable, as we argued above. Again, the insight generalizes. We have very good reason to believe that climate change has already caused immense harm. People have died, species have gone extinct, places have disappeared. It will be impossible for many people to realize important desires they may have had regarding these people, species, or places. A particularly apt way to recognize the badness of this situation is to respond with despair. Thus, actualized-loss climate despair is non-instrumentally epistemically valuable.

So far, we have argued that climate despair can often *itself* be epistemically valuable, that is, irrespective of its consequences for our future belief-forming processes, because it is a form of *recognizing and deeply experiencing the world as it is*. We will now suggest, a bit more cautiously, that climate despair can also have epistemically valuable *effects*. George Bonanno and colleagues have maintained about sadness that "[t]he reflective function of sadness [...] opportunely affords us a pause, allowing us to take stock and to revise our goals and plans."[27] There is reason to think that the same holds for despair.

To see this, recall first that sadness typically comes with a lack of motivation and decreased physiological arousal. Psychologists suggest that the corresponding adaptive function of sadness is to give us a "time out" to allow us to reflect on what is important to us and how to deal with the loss we are facing.[28] Empirical studies support this idea. Sad agents tend to take more time to deploy strategies, engage more in extensive deliberation, be more oriented towards details, and rely less on stereotypes

[27] Bonanno et al. 2008, p. 799; see also Webb and Pizzagalli 2016, p. 860.

[28] Bonanno et al. 2008, p. 799.

for decision making.[29] Above, we said that despair and sadness are similar regarding their representational, motivational, and phenomenological dimensions. If despair and sadness are similar emotions in these respects, then it seems plausible to assume that they also have similar functional roles. And if one core functional role of sadness is to provide us a break to allow us to think more carefully, then this suggests that despair may play the same important role.

One might object that our above claim about despair's intensity is in tension with the view that it can play the reflective role just described. To this, we would like to offer the following reply. We concede that it seems plausible that the psychological pain despair involves will sometimes wholly overwhelm the despairing agent such that careful thinking becomes impossible for a certain period. However, such a period is typically followed by a phase of somewhat less intense pain that does leave room for critical reflection. Moreover, there also seem to be cases of despair that involve the representation that something horrible has or will happen and a strong change in motivation, but not overwhelming psychological pain. Such instances of "quiet despair" also provide an opportunity for time-consuming deliberation and re-thinking of one's values and ways of living.[30]

Let us stress that what we have said here is empirically informed armchair thinking about the effects of climate despair. But if the preceding is on the right track, then climate despair can also be *instrumentally* epistemically valuable. When we are confronted with how horrible a heating world is and will increasingly become, despair can provide us with a serious break. It can allow us to think carefully about what is actually valuable to us, engage in detailed, extensive, and time-consuming deliberation, and develop and deploy strategies without relying on stereotypes. It seems as if humankind's climate-related belief-formation processes may profit a lot from a despair-induced break like this.

Our take on the matter also fits nicely with Huber's recent claim that despair can be a remedy for the tendency to blindly pursue the goal one hopes for, as well as with his

[29] For overviews, see, e.g.: Lench et al. 2016; Karnaze and Levine 2018.

[30] One may wonder whether acknowledging the existence of "quiet despair" is in tension with our above claim that despair is, by its nature, an intense emotion (Section I.A). We believe that this tension dissolves on closer inspection. In cases of "quiet despair," despair's intensity would manifest itself less with respect to the phenomenological dimension. However, it would still be very much "there" with respect to the representational and motivational dimension. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing the phenomenon of "quiet despair" to our attention.

related claim that it can serve as a "deliberative corrective."[31] What we have said here would support this point. However, it would support more than that. Despair would not only be valuable because it tends to protect us against the bad epistemic effects of hope. It would also be valuable because it could help us see the truth and find new strategies to tackle climate change.[32]

III. THE EXPRESSIVE AND SIGNALING VALUE OF CLIMATE DESPAIR

In addition to being epistemically valuable (see Section II), climate despair may also have *expressive and signaling value*.[33] The main idea is that climate despair can express and signal to others and oneself what one seriously cares about. And this is often a good thing.

Recall that experiencing despair over something involves representing that thing as very negative and that despair tends to come with intense pain. When a person feels despair over the death of a loved one, she represents the death as very bad and experiences it as a huge and painful loss. Moreover, experiencing despair over an event or state of affairs, at least in standard cases, presupposes that one cares about the event or state of affairs.[34] If one does not care about a person, then one may coldly judge that her death is a loss, but not experience the loss as painful. If one also suffers because of the loss, by contrast, then this signals to oneself and, when expressed in open behavior, to others that one cares about the person. In this vein, Trudy Govier has observed that part of the nature of despair is that it is opposed to *aloofness*.[35] Or to put it in a slogan and with a focus on standard cases: there is *no despairing without caring*.

Cares are themselves the object of philosophical debates.[36] Fortunately, we do not need to commit ourselves here. All we need to make our point that climate despair can

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[31] See Huber 2023, pp. 82, 94.

[32] Huber himself defends the view that climate despair "is valuable only insofar as and to the extent that it helps us to hope well" (Huber 2023, p. 95, see also Huber 2023, p. 97). One goal of this article is to show that this rather narrow and purely instrumental justification of climate despair is merely part of the story of why climate despair is valuable.

[33] See Karnaze and Levine (2018) for a psychological account of the expressive value of sadness; see Shoemaker and Vargas (2021) for a philosophical account of the signaling value of blame.

[34] There may be a few exceptional cases in which the link between "despairing" and "caring" does not obtain. To illustrate, imagine a science-fiction scenario in which a completely apolitical person is manipulated by evil brain scientists to feel despair over the outcome of an election. Such cases are conceivable, but clearly not standard cases of despair.

[35] See Govier 2011, p. 247.

[36] See, e.g.: Frankfurt 1988; Driver 2000; Shoemaker 2003; Jaworska 2007; and Sripada 2016.

have expressive and signaling value are two basic ideas. First, to care about something or someone is an important and defining feature of who one is deep down. Second, expressing one's cares can play important and valuable roles. Let us say more about these two points.

First, cares are typically understood in contrast to superficial wishes or desires. One may wish to have sea bass for dinner, but this does not say a lot about oneself. It may be a superficial whim. But if a person cares about something, then she has a coherent pattern of emotional tendencies, desires, and thoughts towards a certain object. Imagine that Ann and Beth are in a romantic relationship and that Beth is seriously ill. If Ann tends to be anxious when she thinks about Beth's health problems, joyful when she learns that Beth is doing better, and, in general, desires that Beth have a good life, then she cares about Beth. And when we know that Ann cares about Beth, then we know a lot about Ann. Cares identify the things that are seriously and deeply important to us and that give our lives meaning, at least subjectively. Thereby, cares are among the things that make us the people we are deep down.

Secondly, expressing one's cares is often valuable. If Ann never expressed joy when being with Beth or anxiety when receiving bad news about her health, then Beth would have good reason to doubt that Ann cares about her and that their relationship is as good as she thought it was. Thus, Ann's expressing that she cares about Beth signals to Beth (and to Ann herself) that their relationship is in fact good. And this is a valuable thing because it enables the two of them to have and shape their intimate relationship. Perhaps expressing to others and ourselves what we care about is sometimes even non-instrumentally good: Ann's joy or anxiousness might be thought of as expressing that it is in an empathic sense *she* who loves Beth and that she stands behind their relationship. Perhaps, such an expression is an aspect of living a non-alienated, authentic life which might be considered, at least in one respect, non-instrumentally good. But potentially controversial claims about non-instrumental values aside, expressing our cares is clearly often instrumentally valuable because it helps shape relationships and our roles in our communities.[37] People need to know what their fellow humans really want in order to know whether they are friends or rivals, whether they are reliable partners in social collaborations, and so on. Expressing what one cares about is an important way to give them the relevant information.

Now, let us apply this general line of thinking to climate despair. First, feeling despair over an actual or possible climate catastrophe signals to us and, when expressed in open behavior, to others, what we care about deep down. When people felt despair

[37] See Shoemaker 2024, ch. 2.

over losing their homes and loved ones in Valencia in 2024, this made it clear to them and everyone around them what they care about, what they love, and, thereby, who they are.[38] This may be thought of as, in one respect, non-instrumentally good insofar as it may be an aspect of an authentic, meaningful, and non-alienated life. But it is, plausibly, also instrumentally good insofar as it sends the clear message to others that they are suitable partners for important social interactions such as consolation and expressions of empathy and solidarity.[39]

Second, and even more importantly, climate despair often sends the message that the despairing person cares about *moral* values and norms. To illustrate, compare the following two cases. In case one, Ann feels despair over Beth's health situation which, despite optimal medical care, does not improve. In case two, a person feels despair over the fact that, even though politicians, big global players, and ordinary citizens have (or *should* have) known for decades what the climate consequences of the way we live are likely to be, they have, by far, not done enough to protect the world from grave climate-related harm. One important difference between both cases is that Ann's despair does

[38] One may object that what is valuable in the kind of cases at issue is only the open behavior and not the fact that the behavior expresses despair. However, if the pertinent open behavior (e.g., crying) does not express despair (or some similar emotion), then it cannot play the valuable role of signaling what the agent cares about deep down and would not realize the social and moral values that we focus on here. An opponent might push further and maintain that it is only the expressive behavior (e.g., crying-in-despair) that is valuable and not the emotion itself (e.g., despair) that is expressed through the behavior. However, given that one cannot have the expressive behavior without having the emotion that is being expressed through the behavior (one may, of course, fake the emotion, but then the pertinent behavior would not count as expressing the emotion), it seems unmotivated to us to say that what is valuable is only the expressive behavior. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing these objections to our attention.

[39] One might wonder whether what we call the expressive and signaling value of climate despair is ultimately just another kind of epistemic value: through experiencing climate despair, the thought goes, we signal to ourselves and, when expressed, to others what we care about and thereby enable ourselves and others to gain valuable information about us, which is epistemically valuable. In reply, let us stress that our focus in this section is on *non-epistemic* value and, more precisely, on the fact that climate despair is valuable because it can be an aspect of living an authentic, meaningful, and non-alienated life and help us shape our relationships and roles in our communities. That climate despair realizes these values *via* signaling to ourselves and others what we care about may well reveal another respect in which climate despair is epistemically valuable (it enables ourselves and others to gain valuable information). However, it would still be true that despair has the important non-epistemic values that take center stage in this section. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking us to clarify this issue.

not signal anything about her relation to morality. The case is consistent with Ann's being completely unmoved by considerations about justice or the well-being of people other than Beth and herself, for example. The second person's despair, by contrast, expresses that she has internalized the moral importance of not imposing serious harm on others. More specifically, her despair signals that she *deeply* cares about a core moral value. This is because, as we said above, despair is an intense emotion and represents an event as very bad. In standard cases, feeling despair over an event that constitutes a violation of a moral norm or value thus signals that one takes the relevant norm or value to be *very* important.

Despair can even express virtues like benevolence, justice, or love. Roughly, the benevolent person is one whose character is partly shaped by caring about the well-being of other people. If such a person is confronted with the human-made climate catastrophe and the suffering it imposes on others, and, as a response, experiences climate despair, then her climate despair is an expression of a virtuous character trait. We lack the space to elaborate on this, but we believe that analogous claims could be made for other virtues like justice or love.

We have argued that climate despair can express that the despairing person has internalized certain moral values and norms and that she has certain moral virtues. Climate despair has a third important signaling value, however. In many societies, only a few people seem to care deeply about climate change. In a recent US poll, for example, climate change only ranked 11th on a list of the most important political problems.[40] Moreover, only a few people seem willing to change their daily habits to help fight climate change. In such a situation, climate despair may send an especially important message. When our minds are preoccupied with short-term problems and we are then confronted with people who experience despair over climate change, this may remind us of how important climate change, in fact, is. Other people's climate despair can thus function like an emotional alarm bell for us when we are distracted by other, perhaps less important and only seemingly more urgent problems.

To sum up, climate despair has not merely epistemic, but also significant expressive and signaling value. In the next section, we will turn to objections against our claim that climate despair is valuable.

[40] See Pew Research Center 2024.

IV. OBJECTIONS

A. The Inaction Objection

What we will call the inaction objection says that, by definition, despairing agents lack motivation. What we need in the face of climate change, however, is motivation and the willingness to take action, perhaps even radical action. Therefore, the objection concludes, climate despair is not valuable.

As a reply, note first that the argument sketched above is invalid. This is because our main claim that climate despair has epistemic, expressive, and signaling value is compatible with the claim that climate despair is bad insofar as it involves a problematic lack of motivation. Clearly, a thing can be valuable in one respect and bad in another. For example, vaccination may be bad insofar as it may cause short-term pain or fever, but valuable insofar as it significantly reduces long-term health risks. The same applies to climate despair: even if climate despair is bad in one respect, it can be valuable in others.

A second reply to the inaction objection is that its background assumption that despairing *necessarily* comes with a lack of motivation is implausible. As several theorists have convincingly argued, despair can also promote action.[41] This idea is supported by empirical research. Sociologist Deborah Gould argues that the development of direct-action AIDS activism in the USA in the mid-1980s was preceded and accompanied by widespread despair over the death and suffering of friends and lovers. She even suggests that despair "acted as a goad, inspiring creative risk taking and an abandonment of the tried and true [...] path in order to strike out in new, untested activist directions."[42] Similarly, psychologists recently found evidence that despair among self-identified supporters of racial equality and climate justice movements does not always lead to withdrawal from activism. Lucy H. Bird and colleagues write that "political despair" (as they call it) was positively related to conventional action engagement in all three studies, where conventional action is taken to involve various legal forms of protest

[41] See, e.g.: Huber 2023, p. 92; Kwong 2024, pp. 240–41; and Nguyen 2024, pp. 261–63. In particular, these theorists have also stressed the possibility of "desperate acts" or, as we prefer to put it, "acts of despair." For a very helpful illustration and discussion of this phenomenon, see Nguyen (2024, pp. 262–63).

[42] Gould 2012, pp. 107–8; see also 2024. Huber (2023, 92) also stresses that despair can promote creative forms of action.

such as signing petitions, voting, and attending peaceful demonstrations.[43] It also seems plausible that despair can inspire particular and potentially powerful forms of protest. Funeral marches, for example, are conventional forms of publicly expressing how much one cares about someone who died. Climate activists have adapted these conventions to focus attention on and express their commitment to the values violated and threatened by climate change. There were funeral marches in response to the demise of the climate goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement, lost glaciers in the Alps, and dying nature in general.[44] Like a person who despairs over the death of a loved one can express her despair by attending or organizing a funeral march, those who care about the great losses caused by climate change can do the same.

Moreover, it also seems possible that despair co-occurs with emotions that have very different behavioral effects, and in these cases, too, the tendency to inaction need not be realized. For example, humans who despair because they have lost their homes in a climate catastrophe may at the same time develop anger which is associated with a strong action tendency. Or they may experience a lack of motivation in going through an episode of despair, but come out of it even more determined to fight climate change.[45]

Finally, the lack of motivation that we find in some cases of climate despair may also be part of what makes despair valuable. This reply may appear counterintuitive at first glance. But the initial counterintuitiveness disappears when we consider the following line of thought. It seems very plausible that, in the face of the climate catastrophe, global business leaders, politicians, and ordinary individuals need to rethink their way of life, their long-term strategies, and short-term actions. But doing this is extremely hard if one is confronted with everyday struggles and challenges. Thus, a break from everyday struggles seems very helpful for tackling climate challenges. Despair, as we have suggested in Section II, is an emotional response that can play this role: it provides us with the psychological mechanism to take a step back to rethink and reevaluate everything, even in very fundamental ways. This seems quite good right now. Thus, our final reply to the inaction objection says that the lack of motivation that comes with despair may actually be very valuable.

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[43] Bird et al. 2024, pp. 747, 762.

[44] See: Extinction Rebellion 2025; Word Economics Forum 2019; and Jenkins 2024.

[45] See also Huber 2023.

B. The Public Relation Objection

A second related objection says that what we need to fight climate change is to make people join the "Pro-Climate Team." Despair, however, has a very negative reputation. Associating climate change with despair, the objection continues, is thus counterproductive. Instead of motivating people to fight climate change, it only causes them to turn their backs on it. Therefore, the objection concludes, climate despair is not a good thing.

The public relation objection is based on empirical claims about what motivates people to join the Pro-Climate Team that we cannot evaluate here. So let us grant that these claims are correct. But even then, the argument sketched above would be invalid. Our claim that climate despair has epistemic, expressive, and signaling value is compatible with the claim that it is a very bad idea to highlight despair as a climate public relation strategy. As an analogy, take anti-smoking campaigns. There is an economic benefit to not smoking: "In 2020, the US experienced $436.7bn of economic loss as a result of cigarette smoking. The average loss of personal income per capita due to cigarette smoking was $1100."[46] Interestingly, however, most campaigns do not highlight this valuable aspect of not smoking, but rather highlight that it reduces the health risks for smokers, their families, and friends. This seems justified if there is good reason to think that focusing on the economic aspect would not be efficient. The same is true for campaigns to fight climate change. The Pro-Climate Team should only highlight what actually encourages people to join.

C. The Suffering Objection

A final objection says that climate despair is bad because despair involves suffering and suffering is a bad thing. Our first reply should not be surprising by now. We can agree that climate despair is bad insofar as it involves suffering and hold onto our claim that it has epistemic, expressive, and signaling value. These claims are fully compatible. Note also that nothing of what we have argued so far commits us to the claim that one should *make* people feel despair. Rather, we have argued that the climate despair some people experience is valuable in certain ways. But it is clearly not the case that one should bring about everything that is valuable in certain respects.

Our second reply is, once more, that the suffering involved in climate despair can also play positive roles.[47] Recall our argument to the conclusion that despair can

[46] The Lancet 2022.

[47] For a similar debate about the value of the pain involved in feeling guilty see, e.g.: Nelkin 2019; and Macnamara 2020.

constitute a kind of value recognition that is epistemically valuable (see Section II). As we have argued, feeling despair over an event can be a way of recognizing and deeply experiencing its badness. To see this, contrast, again, the painless judgment that it is bad that a friend died with the recognition of the death's badness that is constituted by painful despair. Or compare a person's emotionally cold and painless judgment that a war crime is morally bad with another person's painful recognition of that badness. The latter response seems to be not merely a particularly apt way of recognizing the moral badness of the situation but also of the fact that one has internalized important moral values and that one cares deeply about them. However, these epistemically valuable responses are *partly constituted by suffering*. The same, we maintain, is true for feeling despair over climate catastrophes.

V. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have asked whether there is value in responding with despair to human-made climate change and the way the world is currently trying to deal with it. We have argued that this question should be answered in the affirmative. First, climate despair can be epistemically valuable: It can constitute a kind of value recognition that is non-instrumentally epistemically good and it can be instrumentally epistemically good when it provides a "reflective break" that enables us to develop new strategies. Second, climate despair possesses several valuable expressive and signaling functions. Most importantly, perhaps, it can send the message that the despairing person cares about important *moral* values and norms, and, thereby, can remind us all of how big a moral problem climate change, in fact, is.

One may wonder if our account is meant to suggest that all of us should, all things considered, cultivate climate despair. This is *not* what we have argued for. An agent may well have outweighing prudential and moral reasons to overcome or avoid climate despair, for example if her climate despair would be so painful that critical reflection becomes impossible for an extended period of time, prevents her from performing important actions, or even leads to clinical depression. What we have argued for, however, is that there is significant and overlooked value in climate despair even in cases in which it is overall bad. We hope that this insight can also serve as a form of validation for those who currently do experience climate despair.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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