

Friday Climate Philosophy

Why taking action helps us to feel better and be able to deal with the climate crisis. A Climate Change story from one of our members.

By anna

6 min. read · [View original](#)

Thank you to one of our members for writing this guest post. It is a difficult read. But, we are in difficult times. It's thought provoking and hopefully helpful for those of us in that place of dread. It will also hopefully provide the reader with some inkling on how we got here – on why we are consuming so much. Of course this isn't getting at "you". You are different. You are already taking the steps that you can to help the planet. Hopefully too, this read will help us to understand those who don't appear to be doing anything. The planet is in crisis. How can anything help? Each little step we take with Planet Sutherland will indeed help us all.

Guest Blog Post

After attending one of the recent meetings I was struck by my fellow attendees' openness

about both their guilt and their anxiety relating to the environmental problems we are becoming painfully aware of. These are emotions I have had a long history with, my own awareness of the damage our species is doing developed when I was still a child and has coloured my whole life. I'd like to share some of the realisations I have come to that allow me to be happy in the face of such terrible understanding. These feelings are rational, there is no shame in feeling them, quite the opposite.



Michael Schriener writes: "Understanding existential guilt requires the recognition that human beings are at once creaturely and godlike, biological organisms tied to the physical world who are also capable of transcending the biological and physical through their creative acts". Our guilt comes from being at once possessed of a transcendent understanding, and at the same time being subject to base animalistic drives. We often hold ourselves to idealistic standards,

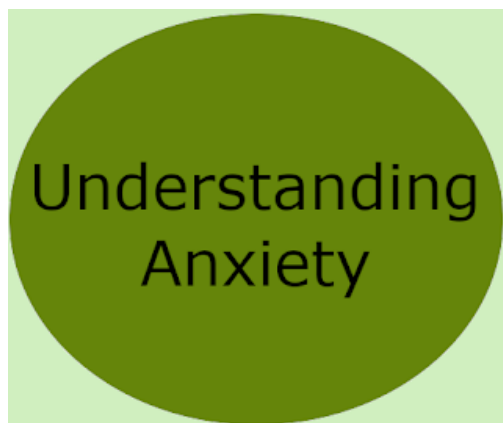
but as flawed (if clever) apes we cannot hope to measure up.

Unhappiness lives in the space between reality and desire, when the discrepancy is between how we want to be and how we actually are we experience this as guilt. Striving for perfection is admirable, but expecting one's self to actually be perfect is folly. We are all sinners. It's OK to be you, if the universe didn't want you to exist it wouldn't have made you. Having said that, guilt has a positive purpose, when our conscience becomes inflamed we should strive to change our behaviour accordingly. There are Buddhist monks who say prayers to their feet each morning for the souls of the various bugs they will inevitably trample to death underfoot. This ritual promotes an awareness that it is impossible to exist within the world without being an instrument of change, and that some of that change will be unintended and negative.

Human beings are social animals, we tend to want to conform to the prevailing social orthodoxy. Unfortunately (for reasons that are outwith the scope of this article) our present society manipulates our circumstance and our animal nature in order to encourage us towards a wanton consumption that is incompatible with the long term survival of our (and other) species. The forces that promote this over-consumption are formidable, they are hacking our psychology to artificially stimulate our

desires and make us behave against our own best interests. I have found I feel less guilt if I resist these manipulations. In order to resist I must first recognise that, and how, I am being manipulated. Be aware that to deliberately distance yourself from cultural norms in this way will sometimes result in bewilderment and even hostility from others, I believe this to be a price worth paying.

Since we live in a society that promotes environmentally destructive lifestyles we must learn to moderate our own behaviour, to limit our own desires. The guilt we feel should be nurtured and listened to, we should be thankful for it, it can guide us towards living in a simpler, more sustainable way. We each must make our own compromises, as already stated: none of us are perfect. I have found that if I avoid doing the things that make me feel guilty I am much happier. Perhaps, if done with love and care, we can occasionally gently prod the conscience of those around us who's lack of awareness can cause them to persist in destructive behaviours.



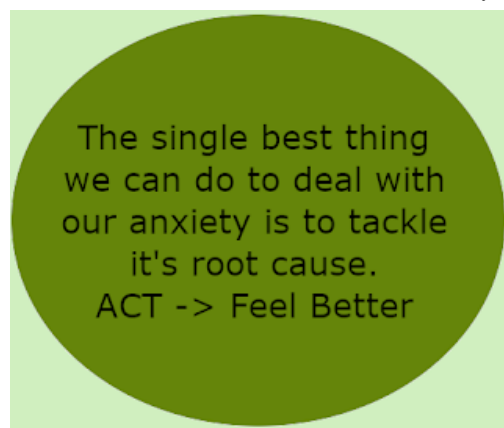
Anxiety can be harder to deal with. To deal with guilt one only needs to address one's own personal contribution to the problem, but to combat the anxiety we must tackle the problem itself, and the particular problem we are dealing with here seems insoluble. Even so, there are some things that I have found help me cope with what is variously called "climate grief", "environmental anxiety" and (my favourite) "pre-traumatic stress".

There is a widespread misunderstanding that humankind stands outside nature, for example: the term "man-made" is used to mean the opposite of "natural". It is true that since the dawn of civilisation humankind has sought, with some success, to insulate itself from the rigours of the natural world. We are however still subject to the laws of nature. The cycle of life is a pervasive universal motif. Things are born, they grow, age, and ultimately they die. This is true of individuals, civilisations, species, even the stars.

It is normal for populations to grow until they exhaust their available resources and pollute their environment to a point at which the population collapses, this happens with bacteria, it happens with rabbits, and it is happening to us now. I am not seeking to excuse the crimes of our species or promote a detached fatalism, but the awareness that the worst excesses of humankind are themselves

an expression of natural law is something I find comforting.

I find that learning as much as possible about the issues helps a lot, not just the immediate environmental issues but also the reasons for them and their implications. I have found myself studying economics, politics, history, sociology, psychology and more in my quest to understand why we human-apes behave in the silly ways we do. In reference to the aforementioned existential guilt I find that better understanding the inner ape allows our divine spark to better control it. Without knowledge of what scares us our fears are undefined, an amorphous looming sense of dread. When we shine the light of understanding on these monsters we can see the shape of them, predict their movements, and are better able to grapple with them. This can be a challenging process, it requires courage, because the monsters are truly frightening. We must abandon many false hopes, we must accept that much has already been lost. Ultimately I have found that it is more than worth it, in part because a deep objective understanding helps with the most powerful tool with which we can combat our anxiety...



Act! The single best thing we can do to deal with our anxiety is to tackle it's root cause, work towards a world which does not evoke our fears. This is a Sisyphean task, but by directing our energy towards positive action there is less left over to produce dysfunctional emotions. We may never bring about a utopia, but by improving ourselves and the world around us we can at least know that we are doing the right thing. We can face the future knowing that we have played our part, and perhaps we can even make some lasting changes that will benefit coming generations. We live in interesting times, we have the rare opportunity to play a pivotal role in the history of our species. This civilisation seems doomed, but through clear thinking and positive action we may still shape the future in such a way that whatever succeeds it preserves and promotes humanity, life and joy.

Many thanks to George for this article. [Join the Conversation here.](#)

And here's some further [interesting psychology on why *doing something* helps with anxiety.](#)

Friday Climate Philosophy

January 24, 2020