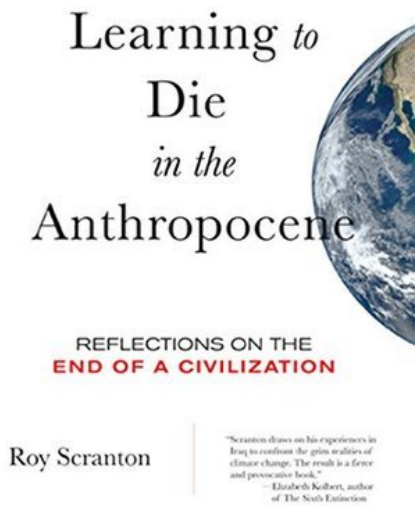

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization

Roy Scranton

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization

Roy Scranton

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization Roy Scranton
"Roy Scranton lucidly articulates the depth of the climate crisis with an honesty that is all too rare, then calls for a reimagined humanism that will help us meet our stormy future with as much decency as we can muster. While I don't share his conclusions about the potential for social movements to drive ambitious mitigation, this is a wise and important challenge from an elegant writer and original thinker. A critical intervention."--**Naomi Klein**, author of *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*

Coming home from the war in Iraq, US Army private Roy Scranton thought he'd left the world of strife behind. Then he watched as new calamities struck America, heralding a threat far more dangerous than ISIS or Al Qaeda: Hurricane Katrina, Superstorm Sandy, megadrought--the shock and awe of global warming.

Our world is changing. Rising seas, spiking temperatures, and extreme weather imperil global infrastructure, crops, and water supplies. Conflict, famine, plagues, and riots menace from every quarter. From war-stricken Baghdad to the melting Arctic, human-caused climate change poses a danger not only to political and economic stability, but to civilization itself . . . and to what it means to be human. Our greatest enemy, it turns out, is ourselves. The warmer, wetter, more chaotic world we now live in--the Anthropocene--demands a radical new vision of human life.

In this bracing response to climate change, Roy Scranton combines memoir, reportage, philosophy, and Zen wisdom to explore what it means to be human in a rapidly evolving world, taking readers on a journey through street protests, the latest findings of earth scientists, a historic UN summit, millennia of geological history, and the persistent vitality of ancient literature. Expanding on his influential *New York Times* essay (the #1 most-emailed article the day it appeared, and selected for *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2014*), Scranton responds to the existential problem of global warming by arguing that in order to survive, we must come to terms with death.

Plato argued that to philosophize is to learn to die. If that’s true, says Scranton, then we have entered humanity’s most philosophical age—or this is precisely the problem of the Anthropocene. The trouble now is that we must learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.

A war veteran, journalist, author, and Princeton PhD candidate, **Roy Scranton** has published in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Rolling Stone*, *Boston Review*, and *Theory and Event*, and has been interviewed on NPR's *Fresh Air*, among other media.

More praise for *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*:
"Perhaps it is because he is a soldier, perhaps it is because he is a literate human being, but the fact is--Roy Scranton gets it. He knows in his bones that this civilization is over. He knows it is high time to start again the human dance of making some other way to live. In his distinctive and original way he works though a common cultural inheritance, making it something fresh and new for these all too interesting times. This compressed, essential text offers both uncomfortable truths and unexpected joy."--**McKenzie Wark**, author of *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization Details

Date	:	Published September 23rd 2015 by City Lights Publishers (first published August 31st 2015)
ISBN	:	9780872866690
Author	:	Roy Scranton
Format	:	Paperback 142 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Science, Philosophy, Environment, History, Climate Change, Politics, Biology, Ecology, Death, Nature

From Reader Review Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization for online ebook

Russell Bittner says

Dale Jamieson, environmental philosopher and the author of ***Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future***, writes that "Roy Scranton has written a howl for the Anthropocene—a book full of passion, fire, science and wisdom. It cuts deeper than anything that has yet been written on the subject." This is high praise coming from a man who'd know—and who wouldn't dish out that kind of praise lightly.

Scranton sets the stage for global catastrophe already on p. 16 with this quote from the geophysicist, David Archer: "'(t)he potential for planetary devastation posed by the methane hydrate reservoir … seems comparable to the destructive potential of nuclear winter or from a comet or asteroid impact." I don't consider myself an ignoramus on the subject of climate change by any stretch of the imagination – and yet, this mention of a methane reservoir just beneath the floor of the Arctic Ocean came as a complete surprise to me.

And just in case you (or I) thought this sounded rather bleak, Scranton concludes the first section of his monograph with "(f)rom the perspective of many policy experts, climate scientists, and national security officials, the concern is not whether global warming exists or how we might prevent it, but how we are going to adapt to life in the hot, volatile world we've created."

Less debatable is Scranton's contention on p. 23 that "(c)arbon-fueled capitalism is a zombie system, voracious but sterile. The aggressive human monoculture has proven astoundingly virulent but also toxic, cannibalistic, and self-destructive. It is unsustainable, both in itself and as a response to catastrophic climate change." Espousing as much is not likely to 'win friends and influence people'—any more than it's likely to usher in the next U. S. president. Instead, we'll all continue to suck on that teat called 'denial' right up until the day it runs mysteriously and definitively dry. As Scranton sagely suggests on p. 43, "(n)o population on the planet today is going to willingly trade economic power for lower carbon emissions, especially since economic power remains the key index of global status."

I could very easily cite the concluding paragraph of Chapter Three (on p. 68) and be done with this review. I think this paragraph sums up the whole issue admirably. But I won't – conclude my review, that is. I'll simply quote the paragraph in full and let you consider the measure of its message. "The problem with the People's Climate March wasn't really that it lacked a goal, or that it was distracting, superficial, and vacuous. The problem with the United Nations isn't that the politicians there are ignorant, hidebound, self-interested, or corrupt. The problem with our response to climate change isn't a problem with passing the right laws or finding the right price for carbon or changing people's minds or raising awareness. *Everybody already knows.* The problem is that the problem is too big. The problem is that different people want different things. The problem is that nobody has real answers. The problem is that the problem is us."

Perhaps the crux of that problem lies here (on p. 77): "(r)estrained aggression keeps people suspicious of collective action and working hard to overcome their fellows, while constant generalized anxiety keeps people servile, unwilling to take risks, and yearning for comfort from whatever quarter, whether the dulling sameness of herd thought or the dumb security of consumer goods."

In any case, "…our present and future: droughts and hurricanes, refugees and border guards, war for oil,

water, gas and food" (p. 82) puts it all in a convenient economy-sized nutshell.

And if you wonder what's to be done… "The enemy isn't *out there* somewhere—the enemy is ourselves. Not as individuals, but as a collective. A system. A hive" (p. 85).

Scranton's monograph (the subtitle of which is "Reflections on the End of a Civilization") is as clarion a call to arms as any I can think of. In her review of ***Learning to Die…***, Naomi Klein (whose book ***The Shock Doctrine*** I read and reviewed at this same Website in May of 2013) termed Scranton's book "a critical intervention." Although Ms. Klein concludes her own book on an optimistic note, I'm fairly certain that Roy Scranton's concluding notes will not be in a similarly major key.

If the urgent suggestion of one ageing Boomer is worth anything to the Gen Xers, Millennials and any other subsequent generations that might still take this raging bull by the horns and try to tame it, I implore you to buy and read this book—and then do something, collectively, with what you take away from that read.

In the meantime, you might do well to heed Roy Scranton's narrative advice: "(t)hrough the ice ages of the past and into the long summer of the Holocene we carried tools, furs, fire, and our greatest treasure and most potent adaptive technology, the only thing that might save us in the Anthropocene, because it is the only thing that can save those who are already dead: memory (p. 95) … The record of that wisdom, the heritage of the dead, is our most valuable gift to the future" (p. 99).

And yet, does any of it really matter? "The causality behind our human bloom is the same causality behind rainfall, quasars, and the roll of the dice" (p. 113). Perhaps, at the end of the day, all that really matters is that Roy Scranton can choose to warn us, we can choose (or not) to heed his warning, and we can then choose (or not) to roll the dice.

RRB
10/31/15
Brooklyn, NY

Kathleen says

"I found my way forward through an old book: Yamamoto Tsunemoto's 18th-century Samurai manual, the Hagakure, which advised: 'Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. [...] To survive as a soldier, I had to learn to accept the inevitability of my own death. For humanity to survive in the Anthropocene, we need to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization."

Joshua Buhs says

A missed opportunity.

I like that publishing companies take risks on unusual book formats. This is an essay, and a pretty short one at that--it could have been a really long article at some magazine, probably. Officially, it's a little over 140 pages, but the book small and the type is large and there is some fat that could have been cut. Hats off to City

Lights--of course--for doing the unusual. I'd like to see more books in this format.

Roy Scranton is a good writer, on the level of the sentence and paragraph. He's comfortable with academic jargon, but does not let it overwhelm his writing, and uses it precisely, so it does not weigh down what he is saying, or even obscure it. That's a good thing. He put together a range of complex ideas. dipped into details when necessary, and moved to bird's-eye views when that was necessary.

And the idea behind this short book is a good one. The basic point that Scranton (seems to want to) make(s) is that global climate change is here; we are past the point of reversing it; it will be dramatic and difficult; and we need to work from there: to process those difficulties, deal with those emotions, understand a world we were bequeathed is being radically and unalterably changed.

Ok, I'm ready for that argument. Let's see it. Scranton lays out what he wants to say in the first chapter--

--and then gives us something else. He wastes so much space in what is already a very short book. Why? I'm not sure. He never gives us what the book promises: how to deal with these changes. How to process this symbolic--and more than symbolic--death.

The very next chapter dips way back in time, as he sketches a brief history of human ecology. Ok. Interesting enough. But not really cashing the check that was written at the beginning. This is a story that has been told many times. Scranton does well to condense it, but still. The following two chapters then offer more stage setting. Scranton makes the case that climate change is probably at the point we can no longer fix it; yeah, sure. I was willing to take that assumption already, when offered at the beginning. (The other chapter, "Carbon Politics" exists, it seems, only to introduce his concept of politics as the dispersal of energy through systems.)

That's not to say I agree with everything he is presenting here. I think that he probably overdramatizes the effects of climate change. They will be difficult, sure, but not apocalyptic: this is not a movie. His dragging on, re-setting the scene gives the reader all kinds of chances to reconsider what he has said, and find holes in it. Is Katrina really comparable to the war in Iraq. Both were cases of human mismanagement, no doubt; but that Katrina was *mis*managed suggests that it could have been managed better--not proof that global climate change will overwhelm government capacities, but proof those capacities need to be strengthened.

And what about the whole notion of the anthropocene. As I say, I was willing to take its existence as a given to get further into the argument, but since we're dawdling here, I have to wonder. It seems narcissistic--apocalypse as jerk-off material. (Not unlike those "Left Behind" books.) Sure, humans might destroy the ecological system that allows us to live--we might kill off ourselves and take a whole load of plants, animals, fungi, protozoans, and bacteria with us. But the earth will persist, and so will other living organisms. Scranton is concerned that we know human life, and especially the anthropocene, are a small part of earth's history--the better to show how quickly we crapped the bed--but it also suggests that even if the apocalypse comes, this was but a brief moment on the planet, maybe with barely a need to be dignified with an entire geological epoch.

The penultimate chapter barely fits into the overall argument of the book, either as it was presented in the introduction, or as he ends up laying it out in the body. It deals with various modes of conflict. Some of this is neat: I like his point that earlier worker movements were effective because we were a nation of producers, and so production lines could be cut off. But as a nation of consumers, with production dispersed over a much more vague network, such interventions are impossible; indeed, it is easier to cut off entire segments of the population, as seems to be occurring with America's growing inequality.

But this takes us far from the main thrust of the book and, unfortunately, remains very focused on America (and, to a lesser extent, parts of Europe). After all, the major effects of global climate change will probably be felt by poorer nations. He does end up bringing it around--he seems to be implicitly arguing with Steven Pinker (The Better Angels of our Nature) that while violence may have decreased in the modern West, it's not a permanent situation, and problems wrought by climate change may again provoke horrible acts. Fair enough--not sure I agree, not sure I disagree, but all of this was already assumed. I want to know how to deal with these changes, not have the case made (yet again) that changes are coming.

But there really is no pay off. The end of the book loops back around to the conclusion, but mostly just repeats it. Scranton returns to his service in Iraq, which he dealt with, in part, by reading Yamamoto Tsunetomo's 18th-century samurai manual "Hagakure" which advised meditating on death and which he interprets as a form of letting go. He reiterates a quote by Montaigne, "To philosophize is to learn how to die." He says we may need to give up our idea that the structure of our cultures, as they are now, may not persist.

OK.

And his big idea is that we need humanist scholars--philosophers--to think about these issues and bequeath the world with their insights.

That's the pay off. There is no answer. But we need new kinds of think tanks. That's it. C'est ça.

I get why Scranton attracted the blurbs he did. He's saying something similar to what Naomi Klein says--capitalism is killing us all; he's saying something similar to what E'izabeth Kolbert is saying--this is the anthropocene, and there will be much death; he wrote for Simon Critchley in the New York Times--and he's saying we need more philosophers to think more deeply about current problems.

But for anyone else? For anyone who wants an actual answer to the questions he poses in the title and introduction?

The book will be frustrating.

Frederick Gault says

The short version, re: Global Warming, "We're fucked". Deal with it says the author, it's already too late. Nothing will be done because the way the world works is based on growth. The only way out is "to embrace death". I see this as embracing the death of our way of life. Like the Way of the warrior once you realize you are mortal and are at one with it, then you can be at peace.

This is a very interesting thesis, and well thought out and well presented. Worth reading. I do have some issues however. No doubt we are in deep shit with Global Climate Change. But, I've been here before. I remember in the 1970's the general belief that over population would result in whole sale catastrophy by the year 2000. The pundits were spectacularly wrong, not only didn't it happen but life was better than ever for way more people. Why? Not because the problem wasn't real. The truth is, the future is unknowable. Spectacularly unknowable. In the case of over population, the "Green Revolution" made it possible to feed lots more people. Is there a similar "revolution" that will mitigate Global Climate Change? I don't know. And neither does anyone else. Whatever happens in the future will not be what we expect - that is the only

prediction I feel makes sense. Does this mean we can ignore Climate Change? No, not at all. As a species we need to work on this most urgently. But I distrust predictions of doom. I do not want to "embrace death" I want to celebrate life.

---

jeremy says

> *the crisis of global climate change, the crisis of capitalism, and the crisis of the humanities in the university today are all aspects of the same crisis, which is the suicidal burnout of our carbon-fueled global capitalist civilization. the odds of that civilization surviving are negligible. the odds of our species surviving are slim. the trouble we find ourselves in will likely prove too intractable for us to manage well, if we can manage it at all.*

expanded from a 2013 *new york times* essay, roy scranton's *learning to die in the anthropocene* is many things at once: an entreaty, a polemic, a history, a personal account, a documentation, a plea, and a chronicle of a death foretold. a former army private during the iraq war, scranton spends the early pages of his slim book drawing comparisons between the "shock of awe" of warfare witnessed and that of unmanageable climate change and the horrors to come. wending his way through a brief biography of human civilization, climate science, and the rapacious effects of the capitalist system, scranton, in the latter portion of his book, argues in favor of culture and more carefully attuning ourselves to the humanities. drawing on philosophy and texts of yore, he makes the case that our treatment of the humanities presages our fate as a civilization.

> *carbon-fueled capitalism is a zombie system, voracious but sterile. this aggressive human monoculture has proven astoundingly virulent but also toxic, cannibalistic, and self-destructive. it is unsustainable, both in itself and as a response to catastrophic climate change.*

scranton doesn't argue for any of the usual quick fixes (carbon trading, sequestration, binding agreements to reduce carbon consumption, techno-miracles, geoengineering, or the like), but instead accepts the fact that we've failed to prevent climate change despite having had decades in which to heed the warnings. declaring capitalist civilization already dead, scranton sees our best hope of survivability and adaptation in preserving and nurturing our cultural heritage. seas are surely rising, temperatures destined to climb ever higher, and the unmitigated effects of our over-consumption are re-shaping the planet's climate and our ability to thrive as we've grown accustomed to doing. *learning to die in the anthropocene*, rather than offering an existential salve to our coming calamities, seeks to reframe the future in a context that offers promise in the form of shifting paradigms and a reorienting of priorities understood. brief but unyielding, scranton's beautifully written book challenges, incites, and, best of all, offers a metaphorical arability in a landscape otherwise scorched by apathy and indifference.

> *the study of the humanities is nothing less than the patient nurturing of the roots and heirloom varietals of human symbolic life.*

ATJG says

I have a coworker who visits me sometimes when neither of us are feeling especially motivated. Lately, we

trade gloomy observations about whatever primary election was held the night before, sometimes it's more general than that. Without fail she picks up whatever book I've brought to read at lunch, flips through the pages eyeing my stickies covered in scrawl. Finally she asked the question: "Don't you ever get depressed?"

Yes, yes I do. I confess. But I try to remember what Cormac McCarthy said: Just because you're pessimistic doesn't mean you have to be miserable about it.

Roy Scranton's svelte volume, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* provides *yet another* facet to the problem of climate change. In addition to summarizing the science, Scranton argues elegantly for the value of the humanities - a value the true measure of which will only become apparent to us in the years to come. For such a dark book, this argument, with which Scranton leaves us at the end, left me feeling strangely hopeful. I shut the book and did my usual stare-out-the-window-I've-just-finished-a-book trick. The feeling remained. I got up to perform the obligatory before bed ablutions and then, in the dim light of the little nightstand lamp I opened *Field Notes on Democracy* by Arundhati Roy and was met with another beautiful instance of book voodoo. Roy's dedication:

"To those who have learned to divorce hope from reason"

Ethan Everhart says

Excellent read, though I should say it spends much more time on the fact of the dying as opposed to learning how to die. Scranton offers a truly withering assault of statistics and scientific opinions that insist our civilization is dying, and I certainly no longer have any illusions about human civilization surviving the next century. It's not especially cynical; it's matter-of-fact: as a society, we've killed ourselves. Not just corporations, not just governments, but individuals as well. This is mostly true of citizens of the Global North, but the result is the same. Human civilization is untenable. We've ravaged our environment and the world is going to become hot, wet, and crowded. By the last half of the book, I had come to realize that our only hope of applying any brakes to the destruction is not happening. It's just not.

It's too late. Nobody is going to do anything about climate change. It's not going to happen.

Now we as a species have to live with the aftermath, and I absolutely appreciate this book for forcing me to confront the meaning of my own life in light of these facts. This book did not teach me much about how to die, or live, but it did give me a jumping-off point for answering those questions, which is perhaps all I can ask of a book on this subject.

Roger Whitson says

This is a difficult book to review. Scranton has a powerful poetic voice. I particularly love his description of human beings as "machines of machines, all and each seeking homeostatic perpetuation, and our lives and deaths pass through this great cycle like mosquitos rising and falling in a puddle drying in the summer sun." I can sense the Deleuzian traces of becoming and anti-oedipal machines-being woven into his prose.

Still, for a book that begins with a quote by Spinoza "a free man thinks of death least of all things, and his

wisdom is a meditation on life, not of death" along with a harrowing narrative of his personal experience as a solider in Iraq learning just this lesson, Scranton's book is remarkably free of specific reflections on what it means to learn to die. At most, he talks about the realities of governments warring over access to food and other resources (a war he insists has already started) and the need for the human race to create arks of knowledge that might survive the coming cataclysm.

What does it mean to live with death? What does it mean, as a culture, to live with death? Apart from a few reflections on his personal experience, we don't really get to this fundamental question in Scranton's book in any meaningful way. Scranton talks about the need for philosophy to interrupt social media feeds of affect that channel our emotions toward compulsive strife, "self-contained wave pools of aggression and fear, pity and terror, stagnant flows that go nowhere and do nothing." His stance against social media is particularly perplexing. Even in the poetic coda, he says that genes, symbolic systems, and emotional stimuli connect us to our human ancestors and are "a form of thought more powerful than any electronic web, more profound than any merely social media." I don't disagree with what he's saying here, but I don't understand why he doesn't see social media as part of this history — woven with circuits made of geological or cosmic histories that are composed of the same material as our human bodies.

Even so, Scranton's book makes a powerful and urgent case for the humanities in the twenty-first century. "We're fucked," Scranton says in the opening chapter, "The only question is how soon and how badly" (16). And we're being primed by our diminishing sense of the common good to identify in increasingly smaller and smaller pools of like-minded people and react intensely towards any stimulus we come across. We need something to help us interrupt our tendency towards instantaneous intense reaction. I can see nothing better than an eco-humanities directed by Spinoza, Deleuze, and (in some ways) Scranton for showing us how to find an alternative to this unsustainable world of greed, addiction, and fear-filled living.

Holly says

> If being human is to mean anything at all in the Anthropocene, if we are going to refuse to let ourselves sink into the futility of life without memory, then we must not lose our few thousand years of hard-won knowledge, accumulated at great cost and against great odds. We must not abandon the memory of the dead.
> *******
> As we struggle, awash in social vibrations of fear and aggression, to face the catastrophic self-destruction of global civilization, the only way to keep alive our long tradition of humanistic inquiry is to learn to die.

This is a book about holding on, and waking up, and preserving human cultural heritage. The book is somber, but not bleak. It's not about giving up all hope, really, but it's something much more subtle, like forsaking how we currently live while at the same time remembering and cherishing the history of humanity. It's complicated; I don't know how to do this.

Origins of the book: While a soldier in Baghdad during the 2003 occupation Scranton discovered that the only way he could do his job was face his fear of his own death: "I practiced owning it. 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. Then, before we rolled out through the wire, I'd tell myself that I didn't need to worry anymore because I was already dead." In this *essai* he uses that idea of learning to die ("To philosophize is to learn how to die"- Montaigne) to explore how humanity can face catastrophic climate

change and the destruction of human civilization. He posits that accepting the truth of the end of civilization is the beginning of wisdom, and that *learning to die* is a means of letting go our predisposition to fear extinction and the culture that brought on the extinction (e.g., industrialism and capitalist ideas of progress and success). To "die" - and thus to survive - we must accept that the capitalist system is on its deathbed and we have killed our future, and then we are free (??). So we hold on to the good stuff and let the rest die away. (?) His methods for responding to the dilemma are philosophy and memory:

> We must practice suspending stress-semantic chains of social excitation* through critical thought, contemplation, philosophical debate, and posing impertinent questions. We must suspend our attachment to the continual press of the present by keeping alive the past, cultivating the info-garden of the archive, reading, interpreting, sorting, nurturing, and, most important, reworking our stock of remembrance. We must keep renovating and innovating perceptual, affective, and conceptual fields through recombination, remixing, translation, transformation, and play. We must inculcate ruminative frequencies in the human animal by teaching slowness, attention to detail, argumentative rigor, careful reading, and meditative reflection. We must keep up our communion with the dead, for they are us, as we are the dead of future generations.

--
* I'm not sure what "stress-semantic chains of social excitation" are, or what it means to suspend them, but practicing more "critical thought, contemplation, philosophical debate, and posing impertinent questions" can only be an improvement on what most of us are doing now.

I admit this is difficult for me to get my head around, since I don't want to give up yet. Scranton reminded me a little of Morris Berman's fringe-y last major book (*Twilight of American Culture*) where Berman more-or-less gave up on culture as we know it and advised the candle-bearers of Western civilization to go underground and live a neo-monastic life for a century or two - which I thought was wacko when I read it 15 years ago. But, this week in the U.S.A. has me feeling pretty fatalistic and hopeless, and Scranton's post-humanist message resonated. I've been thinking all week about how every climate-change statistic and temperature benchmark promulgated by experts from Naomi Klein to the IPCC is now moot and must be recalibrated to account for what will happen in next four years. So I absorbed as much as I could of Scranton's message, but I'm still trying to figure out what to do and how to think.

Douglas Penick says

This small and concise book presents the ecological likelihood of our human fate, the blinkered and predatory ways we are dealing with it, the inescapable human reliance of violence in the case of threat, and the lack of any real control in ensuring our continuity . Roy Scranton, a former soldier, has written a deeply thoughtful essay. It is a call to accepting our mortality while working to continue what has been deepest and most enduring in our culture. One may or may not agree with any of the specific arguments here, but there is no doubt that this book places all the crucial issues on the table.

Jose Moa says

This is a rather original book abot global warming,more on the philosofical side.
The book makes a reflection on the inevitability of the extinction of our civilization as we know it ,caused by

the strong global warming due to the combustible foosil adiction of the world, a unsurmontable adiction impossible of avoid.
Claims to think about our role as humans in the universe,learn to die as a civilization in the better way in the antropocene,preserve if is possible in some way our creations and knowledge in art,humanities,science;that learn to die implies a better reborn as other civilizations have died in the past.

This book written by a Irak war soldier that have seen the deatd very near every day and that have meditated a lot about it,it is for me a realistic and in some way pesimistic view of the next future: the collapse of the our civilization in the brutal warming in the next decades making most the planet unlivable and manage it in the best way.

Max says

A grim (yet oddly uplifting) look at our almost certain extinction in the face of global climate change. I wish the book was a little longer, but it--like our existence, perhaps--had to meet its end too soon.

Stephen says

Basically, we're fucked. So go read a book.

Alex Linschoten says

"We're fucked."
"So prepare to die."

These are more or less the main points to come out of Roy Scranton's book, adapted from a shorter article in the New York Times.

It is a quick read, and he argues that philosophers are a key element to responding to this crisis -- the crisis of humanity's extinction, no less -- by not transmitting pain, fear and anxiety onwards (I'm explaining this badly) and by analysing and thinking about everything.

In any case, I enjoyed the book, though I suspect he is preaching to the choir and that this book will convince nobody, except maybe to cause a few moments to ponder our future deaths.

Edward Rathke says

There are elements of this that are very good. Like the absolute certainty of the anthropocene based on mountains of evidence, the understanding that humanity is not perfectable, and a few other bits in this direction. But most of the book is bad or lazy anthropology, myopic or reductionist politics (that seem to misunderstand very important aspects of civil movements and where political power comes from), and then just a bit of philosophical naivete.

I think this book would have been much better had it just stuck to the evidence that Scranton researched and understands. The science here is all seems sound, given the staggering amount of evidence that leads nearly all scientists to agree with the catastrophe we're running towards. Scranton does something that a lot of people writing about humanity do, though, and it's often rather lazy. Scranton's desire to tie all of this to the ancient past of humanity and our predecessors involves a lot of handwaiving over tens of thousands of years of human history, but especially over the 5,000 years of history between Mesopotamia and the Industrial Age.

But that's kind of par for the course, which is why it would be better to just excise all of it. Scranton uses lists and technical language to elide the fact that he probably didn't do much research on this aspect of the book beyond what a wikipedia summary of human history will tell you.

He also seems to believe that all political power comes from the hands of those in control of energy resources. It's something that makes sense on its face, but falls apart once you think about it for longer than 30 seconds or have ever read a history book. He basically argues that moving from coal to gas and oil caused a concentration of power because gas and oil require fewer workers to make it viable. This seems convincing until you realize that government has, at various times, stepped in to wrest control away from robber barons. Look up Standard Oil, for an easy and extremely well known example of this.

It should be clear that our current economy is not based on our production of power. It's overwhelmingly reliant on finance, which is, to put it crudely, turning social debt into personal wealth. Even with billionaires who made their money through energy (like the Kochs), much of their wealth is now generated through the manipulation of capital, often done by lobbying the government to change laws to their advantage. When Charles Koch became the CEO of Koch Industries, the percentage of taxes he was meant to pay were somewhere between double and triple what his tax rate currently is. That's not a function of there being fewer workers at oil refineries compared to coal mines (a dubious claim on its own since a quick google brings up that 1.39 million people work in oil compared to the 76,000 work work in coal), but because money translates directly to political power in most, if not all, countries.

I could go on like this, but it's one of the biggest issues in the book. It really shouldn't be, since the book is not really about politics or anthropology. It's about science. Or at least it seems like that's what it will be about. Instead Scranton spends a lot of time discussing things he doesn't seem to understand very well to make points that follow his logic but not reality. And then he never really makes a case for what humans should do in the face of the anthropocene, which also seems to be the point of the book.

Anyrate, I would skip this book. Or, if you feel compelled to read it, just read the introduction, which is actually the best part of the book.

Even at just over 100 pages, it feels like of like a waste of time.
