Grappling with the Climate Crisis in IR: Existentially, Psychologically, Interdisciplinarily

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ABSTRACT — The introduction to this special issue argues that International Relations (IR) needs to give greater consideration to the existential and psychological implications of the accelerating climate crisis. Starting from debates about the disciplinary suitability of IR to meaningfully tackle an issue as all-encompassing as climate change, this introduction gives a short overview of how the problem of climate change has conventionally been conceived, and finds that IR has so far not sufficiently appreciated the psychological implications of the climate crisis. Yet, such a perspective is sorely needed, as climate change is not only an environmental problem but also a problem of existentialist sense-making, and because IR's actors are themselves deeply affected by changes to the physical world that they are a part of. Consequently, this introduction provides a sketch of what an existential-psychological inquiry into the implications of climate change could look like and concludes that, regardless of the current state of the discipline, IR has a duty to *become* a discipline that can meaningfully contribute towards mitigating the climate crisis.

INTRODUCTION

There is now widespread agreement that climate change is the most pressing issue of our times (VON UEXKULL – BUHAUG 2021), constituting a multifaceted process that is already transforming our world and posing an existential threat to ecosystems and species alike, humanity included (RIPPLE ET AL. 2024). Although later and to a lesser degree than other social science disciplines (PEREIRA 2017: 11; SIMANGAN 2020: 213; THIERRY ET AL. 2023: 2), International Relations (IR) has begun to recognize the significance of climate change as one of the most visible and urgent manifestations of the Anthropocene.[1] This is evident in the growing scholarship on climate security (FLOYD – MATTHEW 2015; MCDONALD 2021), climate governance (DELLMUTH ET AL. 2018; HICKMANN 2017) and the green economy (ALBERT 2020). Yet, as engagement with climate change in IR is growing, so are questions about whether it is ontologically, theoretically, and methodologically equipped to do so, reflecting anxieties about the continued *"relevance"* of IR in the face of climate change (E.G. MITCHELL 2017: 4, 22; PEREIRA 2017: 2; SIMANGAN 2020: 213) and other worsening global problems (CRILLEY 2024; NEWELL 2024).[2] Is IR a suitable discipline to address a challenge as profound and all-encompassing as climate change?

Critics point to IR's inherent state-centrism and anthropocentrism, which privilege narrowly conceived national interests and the pursuit of power and material resources at the expense of planetary concerns (FIERKE – MACKAY 2023; MITCHELL 2017), and highlight the discipline's Western-centrism amidst its adherence to problematic modernist epistemes, like the Cartesian divide between human and nature or the commitment to a linear progression of time (CHANDLER – CUDWORTH – HOBDEN 2018; HARRINGTON 2016). They criticize the discipline's *"dealing in death"* (NEWELL 2024: 331), for example via a normalization of militarism, economic growth and anthropocentrism, noting IR's failure *"as both a system of knowledge and institutional practice"* to address the ongoing sixth mass extinction and meaningfully challenge the commitment to capitalist practices that underpin it (BURKE ET AL. 2016: 501). At its worst, IR seems like the handmaiden not only of *"power and destructive elite interests"* (ROTHE – MÜLLER – CHANDLER 2021: 5) but of *"extinction"* (BURKE ET AL. 2016: 507) – a source of our current predicament rather than a potential solution.

Of course, these criticisms of, inter alia, IR's anthropocentrism, state-centrism and even racism are not new (E.G. HOBSON 2022; LING 2014; WALKER 1993), although they arguably take on renewed force in the face of the ongoing climate crisis. Still, we can observe that there is a growing scholarship within the discipline that engages with non-state and non-human actors (CONNOLLY 2013; FISHEL 2023; YOUATT 2023), that builds on non-Western theories and challenges modernist epistemologies (AGATHANGELOU – LING 2004; FAGAN 2017; LATOUR 2017; WEATHERILL 2024), and that exists not only at the margins but within mainstream journals and institutions. IR is a diverse discipline that has changed and developed over the past decades, partially as a result of environmental changes (CORRY – STEVENSON 2017: 2; HUGHES 2024: 287), and justified criticisms of many of its more traditional assumptions should not take away from its demonstrated ability to expand its range of analysis, challenge its own metatheoretical assumptions, and incorporate, albeit often belatedly, new breakthroughs in knowledge from other disciplines (CF. CORRY – STEVENSON 2017; SIMANGAN 2020: 216).

It is perhaps in this spirit that some scholars defend the ability and necessity of IR to engage with climate change. While there is broad agreement on the need for more change and that learning from and with other disciplines is vital (BURKE ET AL. 2016; CHANDLER – CUDWORTH – HOBDEN 2018: 207; HUGHES 2024; MITCHELL 2017), some still see grounds for hope in the increase of progressive engagements with climate change's security implications (MCDONALD 2024), in the discipline's familiarity with regional perspectives, which can amplify the voices of those historically marginalized (SIMANGAN 2020), and in IR's potential to consider non-human life through global institutions and international law (BURKE ET AL. 2016; FISHEL ET AL. 2018). More than that, proponents point out that IR is one of the few disciplines whose foundational concern is with the notion of survival (BURKE ET AL. 2016: 517; MITCHELL 2017; PEREIRA 2017),[3] and whose perspective is, from the outset, more-than-national. This makes it *"the obvious home for considering how humanity (divided as it is) deals with the challenges of sharing a singular and finite space"* (CORRY – STEVENSON 2017: 1). Add to that the ongoing popularity of IR as a field of study, as well as its proximity to the centers of power that make international politics, and it seems no exaggeration to say that IR has a moral obligation to do its part *"to end human-caused extinctions"* (BURKE ET AL. 2016: 502).

The question then becomes how this is to be done. In addition to the identified need for greater interdisciplinary engagement we also need to look at IR itself.[4] Given that a discipline like IR not only provides us with a set of ideas and practices, but first and foremost with *"a way of understanding the nature of problems and policymaking per se"* (ROTHE – MÜLLER – CHANDLER 2021: 6), it is useful to start with an overview of the different ways in which the problem of climate change has been understood so far, and to highlight missing perspectives. This is the task of the next section. The section that follows elaborates on one of the identified missing perspectives, namely the existential and psychosocial implications of climate change. While acknowledging the valid criticisms of the discipline's anthropocentrism, it argues that its lack of interest in how climate change affects humans' interiority and their being-in-the-world is a far-reaching blind spot. The case for an existential-psychological perspective forms the background to the contributions to this special issue introduced in section four. These foreground the psycho-sociological dimension of grappling with climate change while also speaking to and drawing from other disciplines, like agrarian populism, philosophy, social psychology, or utopian studies. Finally, the conclusion returns to the question of IR's disciplinary suitability and reflects on its ethical responsibilities.

WHAT KIND OF PROBLEM IS CLIMATE CHANGE?

What counts as an issue or a problem is constructed, of course (CF. BACCHI 2012), and this includes scientific facts like climate change or global warming (PETTENGER 2007). Identifying climate change as a phenomenon that exists and is currently happening in the world does not by itself imply that it is a problem requiring a solution, nor does it tell us what to do about it.[5] How one views a phenomenon and whether one constructs it as a problem will depend, inter alia, on one's prior experiential knowledge and one's ontological and epistemological assumptions, that is, one's worldview or cosmopraxes (KATZENSTEIN 2022; QUEREJAZU 2022). Seeing as academic disciplines are an influential way to structure and generate knowledge (CORRY 2022), it is not surprising that the majority of IR's engagement with the Anthropocene, and subsequently climate change, follows the discipline's traditional interests in security, geopolitics, global governance, and international law (SIMANGAN 2020: 216). Consequently, beyond an IR-specific understanding of climate change as an issue of international or global

politics,[6] we can also identify commonalities in the way the problem is constructed within its various subfields.[7]

Thus, while for some outside of the discipline climate change is a problem of scientific and technological capability, that is, of humanity lacking knowledge about climate change or the technological means to mitigate it in time (GRUBB 2004; PRINCIOTTA 2011), for many within the political sciences addressing climate change is not so much a problem of technological capability as of political will, specifically the willingness to subordinate short-term material gains and economic growth to longer-term planetary concerns (LEVINE ET AL. 2012). In this reading, limiting the effects of climate change is theoretically possible but practically superseded by the desire for sovereignty, economic gain, and the comparative material and security advantages that are perceived to follow from that (BERNSTEIN 2002; FALKNER 2017). Such a construction of the problem as one of competing national interests reflects the logic of traditional power politics (CF. FALKNER – BUZAN 2022), one that is unable to see climate change as more than a collective action problem or a market failure (BERNSTEIN – HOFFMANN 2019; STAVINS 2011; STEVENSON 2013). Analyzing solutions to collective action problems is of course the focus of the global governance literature, where other scholars see the crux of the problem. In this view, we have so far failed to adequately tackle climate change because there is no supranational authority that can facilitate binding collective action and solve the problem of free riding (KEOHANE – VIKTOR 2016; WEITZMAN 2017). Current global governance structures are too much subject to power politics, beholden to the interests of veto powers, and lacking in representation, social justice and equality (NEWELL ET AL. 2023). In other words, the prioritization of national interests and economic growth could in theory be overcome through effective global governance, yet the current institutional landscape is failing in that regard.

In a way, this global governance perspective could be said to operate at the most practical level, promising far-reaching effects if successful, and drawing on solutions with a reasonable record of success in other issue areas. Yet, this is also one of its greatest limitations, as climate change is arguably not a problem comparable to previous issues like nuclear proliferation or the disappearance of the ozone layer (HULME 2009: 291–293). It is infinitely more complex, touching on all aspects of life and requiring a complete

break with the politics that got us here. To this end, some scholars see the solution in norm theory, arguing that what is needed in domestic and international politics is a shift from consequentialist exchange-based thinking towards an ethics-based logic of appropriateness (MITCHELL – CARPENTER 2019; SIKKINK 2024). Such a strategic approach to normative change could learn from past successful campaigns, like the ban on land mines, and target, for example, the use of fossil fuels.[8] Yet, for others this does not go far enough and speaks to climate change being primarily a problem of a failure of the imagination – not only a failure to envision a world post capitalism, but also a failure to imagine a world not divided into nation-states or comparable discrete and competing units (CONVERSI 2020; GHOSH 2016; LATOUR 2017). Accordingly, any solution to climate change has to start with developing the political imagination and conceiving a community that is truly global. Others go even further, arguing that a change in the imagination has to extend beyond our economic and political systems to the precepts of our modern epistemes themselves. From this perspective, the climate crisis is the result of those problematic modernist assumptions that made the invention of the nation-state and industrial production possible (SEE TAYLOR 2004), assumptions about the separation of humans from nature, progress and the linear flow of time, the primacy of the individual, and the ideal of utility maximization (BIERMANN 2021; FAGAN 2017; GHOSH 2016; MITCHELL – CHAUDHURY 2020; ROTHE – MÜLLER – CHANDLER 2021).

These different constructions of the problem of climate change – as one of national interests, capitalist logics or political imagination – are not mutually exclusive. Given that climate change affects all areas of life, it stands to reason that it requires engagement across multiple registers of thought, from the practical to the philosophical. Indeed, it is the coming-together of all these aspects that makes it a so-called "wicked" (HULME 2009: 334) or even "super wicked" problem (LEVINE ET AL. 2012), reaffirming the aforementioned need for more interdisciplinarity. And yet, in spite of the range of existing scholarship, some aspects still seem to be missing from the analysis in IR. One such aspect, identified by critical scholars, is the neglect of the nonhuman or more-than-human. Accordingly, we need to move away from the hubristic assumption that humans are the managers or custodians of the earth and give greater consideration to relational entanglements (KURKI 2020) and the agency of non-human beings. To quote Milja Kurki, *"climate change is so many other things than a climate change problem to*

be solved by humans in the international politics of humans" (IBID.: 119), which is why this scholarship advocates for a decentering of human agency and acknowledgment of factors outside of human control. Problematizing the Anthropocene's anthropocentrism in this way not only challenges long-held IR assumptions about the primacy of survival and the naturalness of the human perspective (CHAKRABARTY 2018; CONNOLLY 2013; FAGAN 2017; MITCHELL – CHAUDHURY 2020), but adds both analytical and normative value by providing a new point of view and exemplifying what non-anthropocentric thinking could look like. While this line of research is still relatively underrepresented in IR, it has already profoundly enriched the discipline.

A second aspect missing from IR, and the one stressed in the remainder of this article, emerges out of what one recent essay described as climate change being too often *"still a story of the world out there: the world outside of us"* (ALDERN 2024) – something that is as true for IR as it is for popular culture and news reporting. What is missing from IR's scholarship on the Anthropocene and climate change, then, is the impact of climate change on the inner worlds of humans as both biological and philosophical creatures (SEE ALSO BJÄRSKOG 2023). The essay focuses on the human brain and the neurological and socio-behavioral changes caused by global warming, but to this we can add the emotional and psychological consequences of becoming aware of climate change. This re-focus on the human perspective is not to undermine the important criticism of anthropocentrism in the discipline, but to recognize that humans, as part of the world's relational entanglements, do not emerge unchanged and unaffected from the present situation. While the assertion that IR *"seeks to explain the world of human interaction"* (FREYBERG-INAN 2006: 248) is based on the problematic separation between the natural and the social sciences, and continues to be used to marginalize analyses that center the non-human, it also highlights that humans have a particularly flexible and intentional kind of agency which makes them world builders (HAMILTON 2017; MITCHELL – CHAUDHURY 2020). This ability comes with the capacity for self-reflection and, importantly, for taking responsibility. We do well to see trees, fish, and planet Earth as actants (CONNOLLY 2013; FISHEL 2023; MORTON 2013), but they are not intentional actors who grapple with the consequences of their actions the same way humans do. To say this is not to assert the moral superiority of human existence, but to reiterate that it is important to understand human interiority when (some) humans can clearly do so much harm. Even denialism

requires, after all, some level of awareness of climate change. In her bibliometric analysis of IR's engagement with the Anthropocene, Simangan finds that IR *"with its humanist foundation, is not as engaged [...] as [other] social science disciplines dealing with the environment or other non-human aspects of nature"* (2020: 213–214). In addition to a lack of engagement with the more-than-human, then, this also points to an underappreciation of humans being themselves deeply affected by the changes they have wrought, precisely because they are part of, and not separate from, nature.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN ISSUE OF EXISTENTIAL SENSE-MAKING

I want to suggest that IR has so far not sufficiently considered how humans grapple with the Anthropocene and all its implications, even though as a largely psychological discipline it is well equipped to do so. IR can be considered a psychological discipline because it is centered on theories that *"rely on implicit psychological microfoundations"* (KERTZER – TINGLEY 2018: 320) even when they are *"not self-consciously psychological"* (IBID.: 329), as is evident, for example, in realism's focus on fear and survival or liberalism's emphasis on trust and cooperation. Accounting for this psychological dimension is crucial to understanding international politics, especially as it relates to mitigating the climate crisis. Humans, and thus all actors in IR, are meaning-seeking beings who need to find their place in, and give meaning to, the world they find themselves in. Struggles in finding answers to such existential concerns can trigger psychological coping mechanisms, which is why it is important to focus on how actors grapple with this new condition of the Anthropocene. When talking about coming to terms with our climate changed present, scholars frequently use terms like *"wrestle"* (FISHEL 2023: 226) or *"groping towards an understanding"* (HAMILTON 2017: VII), yet for me the word 'grapple' captures the work that goes into making sense of our changed condition most intuitively. Thus, here I use the word 'grapple' deliberately for two reasons. First, conceptually, it conveys the struggle and conscious effort involved in developing an awareness and coming to terms with the existential consequences of a fundamentally new and challenging reality. It indicates what a difficult process it is, not only to imagine a spatially and temporally extensive phenomenon like climate change, but also to grasp one's role in it and all the manifold implications for one's existence. Second, analytically, focusing on the process of grappling allows us to investigate a wide range of actors

across all levels of analysis, and ask who is grappling, with what difficulties, and with what effects, thus enabling us to inquire into the socio-political implications of existentialist sense-making.

Awareness of climate change, as of the wider Anthropocene, leads to a process of grappling because climate change is not merely a *"threat multiplier"* (SEE CULLUM 2024), that is, a scientifically complex environmental problem presenting such diverse practical challenges as food shortages, extreme weather, inter-group conflict, displacement, and state failure. Rather, it is a temporally and spatially unbounded phenomenon raising existential questions and unsettling our relationship with time, space, technology, and each other. Put differently, *"[c]limate change is not just an environmental, but also a psychological problem"* (CLAYTON 2020: 5). To understand this, it is helpful to think about Heidegger's notion of *"being-in-the-world"* (2010: CHAPTER 2), which describes how humans do not exist separately from an abstract world but are always already enmeshed with *their* environment, which forms part of their subjective world. It is through this that selves and subjectivities emerge. Put differently, humans secure their sense of self by situating themselves in time and space (BERENSKOETTER 2014) and anchoring their identity to their social and physical surroundings (EJDUS 2017; GIDDENS 1991). Consequently, changes to the geophysical environment, as well as changes to the socio-cultural milieu, can be deeply unsettling, triggering strong emotional and psychological responses, and potentially even undermining one's sense of self.

The field of psychology has long recognized the emotional and identitarian impacts of climate change, identifying, inter alia, different kinds of climate anxiety (CLAYTON 2020), ecological grief (CUNSOLO – ELLIS 2018; HEAD 2016), and climate change denial (WEINTROBE 2013). Anxiety here emerges as a response to uncertainty, while grief is a response to loss, in this case often of a cherished place, an envisioned future, or a sense of self. Denial is a common initial response, as both anxiety and grief are unpleasant feelings which can pose a threat to one's identity. Denial is, however, often also socially embedded (NORGAARD 2006) and can become entrenched when *"there is anxiety that parts of the self will not survive change that now feels catastrophic and [like] too much to face"* (WEINTROBE 2013: 40). Further, scholars have identified new emotional experiences like 'solastalgia' and 'Anthropocene horror' as a result of the climate crisis. The former refers to *"the distress*

that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment" (ALBRECHT ET AL. 2007: S95), that is, the loss of the ability to derive solace or comfort from one's home (IBID.: S96). By contrast, the latter describes a more diffuse horror that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, *"a present but subdued […] background unease"* (CLARK 2020: 66) in the face of the ubiquity and normalization of environmentally destructive practices (IBID.: 77). These experiences tend to be accompanied by devastating and disorienting feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, like when they generate the sense that one's prior systems of understanding are no longer true (CLAYTON 2020: 2) or entail the loss of belief in a future worth living in (CUNSOLO – ELLIS 2018; HEAD 2016). In other words, the field of psychology has demonstrated the importance of anxiety, grief, denial, and social changes for understanding individual and collective responses to climate change.[9]

By and large, IR has been slow to engage with this dimension of climate change, even though it is home to a large literature on, inter alia, identity (CAMPBELL 1998; RINGMAR 1996; RUMELILI 2004), emotions (BLEIKER – HUTCHISON 2008; CRAWFORD 2014; GELLWITZKI – HOUDE 2022), and psychological response mechanisms (FAIZULLAEV 2017; FROSH 2014), and thus in principle amply equipped to carry out such inquiries. IR is also no stranger to investigations into trauma, hope, and discontent (EDKINS 2003; FIERKE 2012; HUTCHISON 2016; TÄNGH WRANGEL 2018), and it is, as has already been noted, a discipline that is fundamentally concerned with existential threats and survival. Given that climate change is nothing if not an existential matter, the relative lack of socio-psychological inquiries into the political implications of grappling with this existential challenge is surprising. There are exceptions of course, like Heinrichs' (2024) investigation into maladaptive routines as a response to the climate crisis, McLaren and Corry's (2023) identification of climate policies as a threat to fossil fuel-dependent *"ways of life"*, or Fierke and Mackay's (2023) exploration of unacknowledged grief and collective agreements not to know. But on the whole, that even a growing, and ostensibly suitable, subfield like Ontological Security Studies (OSS) has so far barely engaged with the issue of climate change demonstrates the general neglect of this aspect of the issue in IR (FOR EXCEPTIONS, SEE MAITINO – VIEIRA 2024; POHL – HELBRECHT 2022). To illustrate what such a psychologically informed inquiry could look like, it is useful to take OSS as an example.

OSS theorizes the effects of anxiety, and related emotions like shame or guilt, on the self, focusing especially on the behaviors actors engage in to protect their sense of self, even at the expense of physical security or other supposedly more 'rational' concerns (MITZEN 2006; RUMELILI 2015). The assumed goal of every actor is to maintain a coherent sense of self, which they do via, inter alia, narratives, routines, and successfully situating themselves in time and space (GIDDENS 1991). Considering the profound impact of climate change on both our sense of time and our physical being in space, OSS thus seems like an especially promising approach for investigating the implications of phenomena like climate anxiety or climate grief. In addition to asking general questions about how climate anxiety manifests in international relations[10] and how both climate change and climate action affect actors' identities, such an inquiry could also investigate the formation of new subjectivities under such conditions, as well as the extent to which efforts at maintaining a coherent sense of self get in the way of effective climate action and produce climate denialism. It seems plausible that efforts at stabilizing the self might sustain 'fantasies' of survival, net zero emission, or *"cool[ing] the planet back to pre-industrial levels"* (KING ET AL. 2022), even as irreversible losses of home spaces and changes to the physical environment force many to reconfigure their identities. Such an approach could be fruitfully complemented with recent insights from the temporal turn in IR, which has excavated the crucial role of time constructions in situating ourselves in the world (HOM 2020; HUTCHINGS 2008), and learnings from Science and Technology Studies, which highlights the constitutive role of technology in creating visions of the future (JASANOFF 2015, 2021). The point is not that an ontological security lens is the only way to get at the socio-psychological dimension of climate change – only that what is needed is an approach that takes seriously the *existential* challenge posed by climate change. The climate crisis has an impact on our inner worlds that we need to grapple with. To paraphrase Roy Scranton (2015), continuing to live in the Anthropocene might mean to learn how to die. To this end, the philosophical and psychological literature on existentialism in IR also seems promising, seeing as it deals with questions about the meaning of life and death under conditions of radical uncertainty (HOM – O'DRISCOLL 2023; RUMELILI 2021; SIMANGAN 2023; VAN MUNSTER – SYLVEST 2021).

All of this is to say that IR already has many of the conceptual and theoretical tools for exploring the psycho-social dimension of climate

change and is thus well-placed to do so. Yet, to say that IR *can* investigate the psychological effects of climate change is not the same as saying that it *should*. There are at least four reasons why IR should pursue this research agenda. First, in disciplinary terms, IR is *"in many ways a psychological discipline"* (KRICKEL-CHOI 2021: 7). To the extent that climate change affects the human condition and our collective psychological wellbeing, it is incumbent on IR to investigate whether its "psychological microfoundations" need rethinking. Second, a socio-psychologically informed approach to climate change presents an opportunity for IR to rethink many of its foundational modernist assumptions, such as ideas about progress, the human-nature divide or the linearity of time. In this way, it is an opportunity to develop overall better explanatory accounts of contemporary international politics, beyond the phenomenon of climate change. Third, to the extent that research is performative and (re)productive of our world(s) (ARADAU – HUYSMANS 2014), taking seriously that climate change is something that is experienced in the here and now by real people can help drive home the urgency of the climate crisis in the present, as opposed to it being seen as a hypothetical scenario that is still in the future.[11] Lastly and relatedly, there is a normative argument to be made for pursuing such a research agenda, given the urgent need to tackle this principal political problem of our times. If there is any chance that looking at the psychological dimension of climate change can help us understand and overcome inhibitors to climate action, there is no justification for leaving this angle comparatively underexplored. In this spirit, the next section introduces the contributions to this special issue, which take up this challenge but also combine a focus on actors' psychological underpinnings with insights from other disciplines in unique ways.

GRAPPLING WITH THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN IR

To summarize, we can observe that there is a lively debate within IR about whether it can, and how it should, deal with the problem of climate change, that attention to the psycho-political dimension of the climate crisis is curiously missing, and that there are good reasons for why IR itself needs to grapple with this dimension of climate change. The contributions to this special issue tackle the issue of grappling in various interdisciplinary ways, foregrounding, inter alia, how climate denialism goes hand-in-hand with having one's self-identity challenged, how needs of the self (for justice

or recognition) can override other concerns, and how actors constantly work to re-situate themselves in time and space, for example by constructing competing visions of the present predicament and the future. In this way, the contributions assembled here present a first step towards inaugurating an IR research agenda focused on the existential-psychological dimension of climate change.

Heinrichs and O'Loughlin (2025) draw from existentialist philosophy to investigate the politics of international climate negotiations, specifically how climate vulnerable countries seek to confront heavy emitters for their failure to engage in meaningful climate action. By theorizing and methodologically developing Sartre's concept of bad faith, they present an account that not only centers the role of human choice, and therefore responsibility, in maintaining behavior that puts life on earth at risk, but that also points to the mental gymnastics necessary on the part of heavy emitters to keep living with the knowledge of what they are doing. Sartre's notion of bad faith links choice to identity by foregrounding that a lack of authenticity requires acts of self-deception, that is, the conscious denial of one's freedom to be and act differently. Confronted with such bad faith charges, heavy emitters tend to resort to various forms of psychological denial, while climate vulnerable states use these evasive responses to challenge the governing logics of the international system and renegotiate their own positionality within them.

Continuing the theme of identity and climate cooperation, Hanson and Reboredo (2025) develop a framework to assess the effects of inequality on climate cooperation and policy implementation. Inequality – both between and within countries – has been shown to be a major barrier to successful climate action because related identities (as, for example, developed or developing) influence perceptions about the fairness of climate policies. Given that perceived fairness is a major determinator of the success of collective action, it is crucial to systematically locate those areas in climate policymaking where inequality-related identities might lead to contestation, and to do so across scales, that is, from the individual, national and regional to the global level. To this end, Hanson and Reboredo draw from Social Identity Theory to identify seven criteria that have been shown to facilitate intergroup cooperation, and give some examples for their application in IR. Ultimately, this framework not only enables the

identification of friction points that can lead to the failure of climate action, but also provides guidance for increasing the rate of climate policy implementation.

Matejak and Mahmutović (2025) provide in many ways an empirical illustration of this framework, investigating how the EU's climate policies are perceived as unfair by people on the ground, specifically by farmers who view them as an undemocratic imposition by ignorant elites. Situating their study in the context of global farmers' protest movements, they focus specifically on the 2023–2024 farmers' protests in Slovenia to analyze how these farmers make sense of new environmental regulations and their own role within the climate change discourse. By combining the theoretical insights of agrarian populism with a methodology centered on affective-discursive practices, Matejak and Mahmutović are able to identify the underlying grievances and concerns of the protesting farmers and how these affect the implementation of environmental policies in agriculture. A key insight is that these farmers feel painted as the 'villains' of climate change and underappreciated considering their crucial role in society, but that they are not necessarily climate skeptics or anti-science, despite what the piggybacking of the far right on their protests might suggest. Given the rise in agrarian environmental policies and the transnational nature of farmers' protest movements, farmers also emerge as important actors that should be taken seriously in IR.

Investigating a different aspect of our contemporary populist moment, Crescentino (2025) analyzes the role of environmental denialism within the agendas of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Argentina's Javier Milei. By bringing populism studies into conversation with utopian studies, he shows that even conservative and reactionary political projects, like those of Bolsonaro and Milei, contain within themselves visions of a utopian and reformed future. Specifically, both of these populist leaders paint a picture of a utopia of absolute autonomy, that is, of freedom from state intervention for individuals and freedom from international commitments for states, which would restore economic prosperity. This liberal utopia is positioned as a counter to the present-day dystopian narrative of the climate crisis, which both Bolsonaro and Milei view as manufactured by *status quo* elites. In propagating this account, both leaders exploit people's real economic hardships, mobilize grievances about a colonial Global North hindering

the development of the Global South, and justify extractivist and environmentally destructive policies in the name of sovereignty and the idea that "nature should serve man". Ultimately, Cresentino argues, climate skepticism and denial are not ends in themselves but strategic tools within the far right's broader agenda to disrupt the entrenched, supposedly socialist, *status quo*.

Lastly, Yamada, Melin and Chen (2025) take on the challenge of denaturalizing those ideals that form the backbone of Bolsonaro and Milei's utopias and that deny the reality of climate change by framing it as something spatially and temporally distant. They do so by incorporating insights from Mahāyāna Buddhism to deconstruct the framing of nuclear energy as a green here-and-now solution. Starting from the curious recent rise in the popularity of nuclear energy as a solution to both climate and security concerns, they analyze the pro-nuclear campaigns in Japan and Taiwan – two countries that have embraced nuclear energy as a one-stone-two-birds solution. They find that both campaigns build on modernist ideas about the division between humanity and nature, the linear progression of time, and the veneration of the autonomous individual. These, they argue, are precisely the beliefs that enable the exploitation of nature (and people) and maintain the current capitalist system that brought climate change about. Consequently, the embrace of nuclear energy is not a solution to the climate crisis but an expression of its continuation. To counter the pro-nuclear narrative, Yamada, Melin and Chen introduce Mahāyāna Buddhism's relational understanding of space and time as an alternative to modernist cosmological assumptions.

These contributions underscore the socio-psychological nature of negotiating the climate crisis and begin to draw out its existential dimension. They show how the social and geophysical changes wrought by global climate change clash with actors' ideas about themselves and their role in the world, leading not only to geopolitical tensions and climate denial, but also to the actors' attempts at re-situating themselves in time and space. The contributions provide snapshots of different places in the world where different actors grapple with climate change in different ways, and together they hint at a complex picture of not only environmental, geopolitical and economic dynamics, but existential and psychological ones as well.

In the process, they reconfirm the value of learning from and with other disciplines, which is perhaps a particular strength of IR.

CONCLUSION

This introduction opened with the debate about the suitability of IR as a discipline for engaging with the climate crisis and the Anthropocene more broadly. Yet, what becomes clear in the course of this special issue is that, regardless of its suitability right now, IR has a duty to *become* a discipline that can account for climate (in)action and contribute towards potential solutions. Standing back is not an option, especially given that IR already routinely deals with many aspects relevant for the climate crisis, like global governance, the international economy, or the political imagination. Beyond narrow concerns about the discipline's continued "relevance", then, IR scholars have a responsibility to do all they can to contribute to our collective understanding of the climate crisis and thus to its mitigation. The good news is that IR can build on already existing resources and practices, like its demonstrated ability to incorporate new subjects of analysis or to critically rethink some of its core assumptions, although care needs to be taken not to simply add ever more perspectives without also transforming some of IR's more harmful practices. The recent surge in scholarship on the non-human is a case in point, as is the 'relational turn', with both approaches not only providing new perspectives on the problematique of climate change (E.G. FISHEL 2023; KURKI 2022), but challenging, and thereby enriching, conventional IR in more fundamental ways (E.G. CHEN – KRICKEL-CHOI 2024; KURKI 2020). In a similar vein, this special issue makes the case for two further developments in the form of, first, a more explicit embrace of interdisciplinarity and, second, greater systematic attention to the psycho-social dimension of existential grappling with the experience of climate change.

IR's tendency to import theories and concepts from other fields of study without exporting anything 'back' in return is a source of ontological anxiety to some, giving rise to discussions about a discipline-wide inferiority complex and calls for more internal coherence or the development of a commonly shared positive definition of its subject matter (GUZZINI 2020; ROSENBERG – TALLIS 2022). By contrast, this special issue shows that interdisciplinarity is one of IR's greatest strengths. Not only does it indicate

theoretical openness and a willingness to learn from and with others, but IR's fracturing of these 'external' bodies of knowledge through its unique lens of 'the international' generates new and original insights which help our understanding of the world. Learning from social theory, which led to constructivism, and quantum theory has arguably led to a wider range of sophisticated IR analyses, and the contributions to this special issue confirm this point. By bringing agrarian populism, utopian studies, social psychology, and Eastern and Western philosophy to bear on traditional IR themes like international negotiations, popular protests and energy security, they draw our attention to as-of-yet-underappreciated aspects of the climate crisis. An IR discipline committed to doing its part in mitigating the impacts of climate change will have to foster this kind of openness and be less self-conscious about taking ideas from elsewhere – especially because climate change is such a mind-bendingly complex phenomenon that no single discipline can possibly provide a comprehensive picture of its implications. IR's tradition of 'borrowing' from other disciplines might thus prove to be of particular usefulness.

Regarding the second development, as mentioned, IR is already a deeply psychological discipline by virtue of its interest in the world of human interaction and its major theories being based on assumptions about what humans are like. What is needed, then, is not an increase in imports from the field of psychology per se, but a turning of this already existing psychological lens onto the problem of climate change, based on a recognition that climate change is as much a psycho-philosophical problem as a problem of power distribution or collective action. As Scranton writes in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene, "the conceptual and existential problems that the Anthropocene poses are precisely those that have always been at the heart of humanistic inquiry: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live? […] What does my life mean in the face of death?"* (2015: 20). Yet, what is changing in the face of climate change is the answers we give to those questions. To grapple with the climate crisis is to come to terms with the way it changes how humans situate themselves in time and space, interact with each other, give meaning to their lives, and imagine their futures. It is a focus on these processes of grappling that is needed to better understand this socio-psychological aspect of the climate crisis. Like the incorporation of more extra-disciplinary knowledge, such a development would foster the skill of seeing different worlds, of moving away from

a universalist bird's eye perspective and putting oneself in the shoes of those who face the climate crisis in different ways. The contributions to this special issue show that it is many different actors who grapple with the effects of climate change in different ways, not only vulnerable states and fossil fuel-dependent countries but also individual politicians, farmers, and many others, and that these actors do not emerge from this process unchanged. To this we might add that IR scholars, too, are currently engaged in a process of finding their place in a climate-changed present, and that we can expect IR to change as a result. There is reason to think that this change will be for the better.

ENDNOTES

1   This is not to deny that the discipline has seen some engagement with climate change for over 30 years. Yet, it seems to me that climate change's arrival in the mainstream is a product of the past decade or so (cf. Von Uexkull – Buhaug 2021).

2   It is worth pointing out that anxieties about IR's disciplinary "relevance" are not new and predate debates about climate change (see Guzzini 2020).

3   Some other fields concerned in different ways with survival are, for example, Conservation Biology, Extinction Studies, and Existential Risk Studies.

4   By interdisciplinarity I mean actively learning from other branches of knowledge and integrating their various insights to some extent.

5   For a critique of framing climate change as a problem requiring a solution, see Hulme (2009).

6   Of course, the construction of climate change as an 'international', 'global' or 'planetary' issue is also contested (e.g. Chandler – Cudworth – Hobden 2018).

7   While this article organizes the problematization of climate change around IR's major subfields, it is also possible to trace the changing disciplinary conceptualization of climate change over time; for example, from a problem concerning only the external environment to something that impacts on everything and everyone (Biermann 2021), or from a unitary problem to be solved through global governance to a process that cannot be solved but only mitigated and adapted to. I thank Gunilla Reischl for pointing this out to me.

8   For some of the difficulties with achieving normative change, see Kolmaš (2025).

9   Even apathy is thus understood as a response to anxiety and a way of grappling with the climate crisis (Letzman 2013).

10   The literature has identified different kinds of anxiety that might be relevant here, for example existential anxiety about death, epistemic or spiritual anxiety about the meaning of one's existence, and moral anxiety about the right thing to do (Berenskötter 2020; Simangan 2023).

11   I am indebted to Nicolai Gellwitzki for this point.

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