



# Practicing for Death in the Anthropocene

Reading Christian Asceticism after  
the End of the Human

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**Abstract** This article analyzes the theme of practicing for death as it has emerged in recent environmental discourse. In the first part, it situates Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015) in the context of new critical approaches to death and asceticism, especially Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (2013). In the second part, it offers an environmental reading of the "remembrance of death" as it appears in John Climacus's influential seventh-century manual, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Here, the authors build on Sloterdijk's remarks on Climacus while developing Sloterdijk's analysis substantially, drawing (in part three) on ecotheological readings of Byzantine asceticism to elucidate Climacus's environmental practice. The authors argue that what is at stake in the remembrance of death is the death not of the self but of a perception of the self that valorizes the self-possessed subject. In the final part, they compare the death of specific self-images in Christian asceticism to the death of the human qua self-possessed subject in the posthumanist ethics of Rosi Braidotti. At the same time, the authors see Climacus as deepening positions sketched out in Braidotti's posthumanism and providing a critical perspective on the idea of resigning from care.

**Keywords** Christian asceticism, environmentalism, John Climacus, Peter Sloterdijk, Rosi Braidotti

In an epoch of rapidly accelerating climate change with environmental catastrophes in its wake, we are confronted with the challenge of how to rework human ways of Earth-living. According to Lynn White's influential narrative, Christian theology would not appear to be able to bring much to the table in such a discussion because it celebrates human exceptionalism through its portrayal of human beings' dominion over nature.<sup>1</sup>

1. White, "Historical Roots."

At the same time, White suggested there were other aspects of Christian theology that might offer alternative perspectives. White's narrative thus provided theologians with a challenge but also an invitation.<sup>2</sup> By now a substantial literature of ecotheology exists that reexamines Christian theology from within the tradition.<sup>3</sup> In the past decade, scholars engaging with ascetical theology in Greek patristic thought have developed environmental readings of Christianity through engagements with the Eastern Orthodox perspectives of ascetics like Evagrius of Pontus and Maximos the Confessor.<sup>4</sup> Ascetical theology encouraged attitudes of attentiveness through a practice known as *phusike theoria*, or contemplation of nature.<sup>5</sup> The significant work, especially by Douglas Christie, to develop a "contemplative ecology" and the wider contemplative turn in recent theology form the immediate backdrop to the present study.<sup>6</sup> But where the majority of existing contributions have concentrated on bringing to light the practice of *phusike theoria*, we will be turning our attention to an aspect of ascetical theology that would seem, at first glance, more controversial from an environmental point of view: the self-renunciation or "dying-to-self" that lies at the heart of Christian asceticism.

In the 1980s, Michel Foucault argued that Christian asceticism's practice of dying-to-self transpired as a preoccupation with shame and a desire to escape the world for a purely spiritual realm.<sup>7</sup> In Foucault's work, dying-to-self thus figures as a counterexample to other forms of ascetic exercises in Hellenistic philosophy, such as Stoic contemplation.<sup>8</sup> But it is possible to see in self-renunciation the foundation for an other-regarding ethics and a decentering of the human. Philosophers and cultural theorists today protest modernity's individualism in the name of the "death" and "end" of the human. In so doing, some of them explicitly invoke ascetic practices of self-renunciation and dying-to-self, questioning the link between asceticism and anthropocentrism.

Since the introduction of the concept of the Anthropocene as a name for our current geological epoch, the idea that divestment from self-centered goals and "deeper investments in a life beyond ourselves" has gained fresh currency.<sup>9</sup> Writer Roy Scranton's

2. Jenkins, "After Lynn White"; Whitney, "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots'"; LeVasseur and Petersen, *Religion and Ecological Crisis*; Tyson, *Theology and Climate Change*, 11–20.

3. For example, Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*; Hallman, *Ecotheology*; Scott, *Political Theology of Nature*; Kearns and Keller, *Ecospirit*; Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*; Northcott, *Political Theology of Climate Change*.

4. Such as Christie, *Blue Sapphire*; Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*; Foltz and Chryssavgis, *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*; Kohák, *Embers and the Stars*, 3–29, 47–67; Nordlander, "Green Purpose"; Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation*; Wirzba, "Christian *Phusike Theoria*."

5. Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things*.

6. Christie, *Blue Sapphire*; cf. Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*; Sherman, "Reading the Book of Nature."

7. Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 23–49.

8. McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis*, 111, 300–1n76.

9. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 91. On the Anthropocene as a concept, see Bińczyk, "Most Unique Discussion"; Haraway, "Anthropocene"; Malm and Hornborg, "Geology of Mankind?"

widely acclaimed 2015 book, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, is the most prominent example.<sup>10</sup> Scranton draws on different cultural and philosophical examples of self-renunciation and the *ars moriendi* to articulate an environmental ethic inspired by asceticism's most memorable exercise: practicing for death.

One significant figure, however, is left out of Scranton's narrative of the *ars moriendi*. During the first millennium CE, John Climacus (also known as John Sinaites), a monk of the Egyptian desert, made the remembrance of death and learning to die a cornerstone of Christian spirituality. In what follows we will be giving voice to Climacus in the context of an ongoing discourse concerned with what it means to die to the self in an epoch of accelerated death and species-wide extinctions.<sup>11</sup> Through the particular focus on Climacus's *Ladder*, we show how the ontological presuppositions of the text are essential not only to its understanding but also to practicing the form of life it recommends.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first, we introduce the theme of practicing for death as it has emerged in recent environmentalism. Beginning with Scranton's work, we situate his concept of "learning to die in the Anthropocene" in the context of Peter Sloterdijk's work on Christian self-renunciation as a decentering of the human. We discuss Sloterdijk's use of thanatology and his interpretation of asceticism in light of its potential to turn human beings into "a fakir of coexistence with everyone and everything, and reduce [our] footprint into the environment to the trail of a feather."<sup>12</sup> In the second part, we turn to Climacus and offer an environmental reading of the *ars moriendi* as it appears in his seventh-century manual, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Here we build on Sloterdijk's brief remarks on Climacus in *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, while developing Sloterdijk's analysis substantially. Where Sloterdijk glosses over the monastic psychology of the *Ladder*, we argue that Climacus's detailed observations of human behavior are crucial to an environmental reading of the *Ladder*. We show how they both help to flesh out the psychology implicit in Scranton's essay, as well as problematize it. The interplay between the theme of dying-to-self and different ideas of nature (*phusis*) is significant. To this end we address the paradox of "hating nature" in Climacus's asceticism. Drawing on Bruce Foltz's analysis of *phusike theoria*, we identify three different levels of discernment operating in the text: human, demonic, and divine. In the final part, we argue that what is at stake in Climacus's thanatology is the death not of the self but of a perception of the self that valorizes the human as above nature. The ascetic's practice of dying-to-self is then possible to construe in terms of a spiritual exercise for the antispeciesist disavowal of human exceptionalism. Finally, we

10. Scranton's text first appeared as an essay on the *New York Times* blog in 2013 (<https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>) and later took book form.

11. Kolbert, *Sixth Extinction*.

12. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 449.

draw comparisons between the death of specific human self-images in Christian asceticism and the death of the human qua self-possessed subject in the posthumanist ethics of Rosi Braidotti. Despite her explicit distancing from Christian mysticism, we argue that Braidotti's posthumanist ethics recommends a practice remarkably similar to that of Climacus. Like Climacus, Braidotti aims at dismantling the self-possessed subject by recalling it to its interdependent nature and showing how it participates in a life that exceeds individual existence. Thus, in both Climacus and Braidotti the resignation from care needs to be understood as an exercise in dying to the perception of the natural world as a warehouse of goods existing for human consumption. Ultimately, however, it is Climacus who provides the ontological framework that enables and motivates human beings to detach themselves from their own particular life: they are partaking in divine love that saturates all life. Unlike Braidotti, then, Climacus would be able to defend the implicit human exceptionalism without privilege that underlies both their approaches—even though, *prima facie*, Climacus's stance goes against the grain of Braidotti's ethics.

### 1. The Anthropocene, Asceticism, and Practicing for Death

The sheer complexity and urgency of the situation now called the Anthropocene is overwhelming. Roy Scranton, a former US soldier who fought in Iraq and now an associate professor of English, applied the drastic image of the soldier in combat to our predicament. To be of use to their division, soldiers have to anticipate, imaginatively, their own death: "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."<sup>13</sup> Such is Scranton's recommendation for existing in the Anthropocene: writing from the perspective of a "we" situated in Western global capitalism, individuals need to accept their transience and learn to die—imaginatively, that is, to their customary ways of life.

As provocative as it first appears in his telling, Scranton's "learning to die" has old roots. Scranton mentions Dōgen Zenji and the samurai warrior Yamamoto Tsunetomo as well as Cicero and Michel de Montaigne, the latter of whom borrowed the idea of practicing for death from the Stoics, renowned in antiquity for their skillful application of the *ars moriendi*.<sup>14</sup> The Stoics in turn borrowed the idea of "learning to die" from Plato. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates explains that "people do not realize . . . that the one aim of those who practice philosophy . . . is to practice for dying and death."<sup>15</sup> As it did for Plato, Scranton's "practicing for death" means dying to destructive habits and ways of living.<sup>16</sup> The root cause of the Anthropocene, Scranton argues, is the way in which a large portion of the earth's population has been led into destructive habits that impede independent

13. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 22.

14. On the art of dying in ancient philosophy, see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 68–69.

15. Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a3–4.

16. Cf. Brill, *Plato on the Limits of Human Life*, 1–15, 64–82.

thinking. To illustrate what learning to die means in the Anthropocene, Scranton therefore refers to the idea of “letting go”: “Learning to die means learning to let go of the ego, the idea of the self, the future, certainty, attachment, the pursuit of pleasure, permanence, and stability.”<sup>17</sup>

Scranton’s book is not unique in its preoccupation with death. Insofar as it argues that the Anthropocene calls for the “end” of self-destructive ways of living, *Learning to Die* may be compared to the work of Bernard Stiegler, whose concept of the “Neganthropocene” is roughly contemporaneous with Scranton’s book and shares its basic concern with dying as an environmental skill.<sup>18</sup> Common to both writers is a desire to think of the Anthropocene as a time in which death becomes important not only as the object of discussion (how to prevent a sixth mass-extinction wave) but as a practice, as pragmatics (how to die to extinction-provoking habits). At the heart of this argument is a distinction between destructive and generative habits, and an emphasis on the importance of individual choices and on reflecting on such choices, especially in societies with carbon- and methane-rich lifestyles.<sup>19</sup> Where Stiegler, however, follows Martin Heidegger in picturing life as a being-toward-death, Scranton takes his lead from Peter Sloterdijk’s idea of “thanatology” (from the Greek *thanatos*, “death,” and *logos*, “discourse”).

In *Anthropotechnics*, Sloterdijk introduces thanatology as a gloss on Climacus’s *Ladder*, which we present in detail below. For Sloterdijk, Climacus’s text “stands out from the flood of monastic literature” on account of its “masterful overview of monastic psychagogies” for directing the soul (psychagogy from the Greek *psuche*, “soul,” and *ago*, “lead”).<sup>20</sup> Principal among these psychagogies is the *ars moriendi*. Sloterdijk describes it as an “*anabasis* unto death” that summarizes the whole life of the ascetic.<sup>21</sup> It is an *anabasis*, a “forward march,” because of the martial metaphors that illustrate ascetic practices in the *Ladder*. The word *askesis* in Greek means “exercise” without any spiritual connotations, and Sloterdijk argues that the *Ladder* retains its connection to ancient martial arts in its presentation of the spiritual life. The ascetic, however (and here the Christian tradition takes over the practices of the Stoics), inverts the priorities of the soldier. For the soldier, the enemy is without, in the environment; for the ascetic, the enemy is within, in the subject and the habits that constitute subjectivity. Paraphrasing Climacus, Sloterdijk remarks on the “fist-fighter and athletes of Christ,” whose aim

17. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 92.

18. Stiegler, *Neganthropocene*. On the art of dying and environmentalism, see also Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*; and the discussion in Besley and Peters, “Life and Death.”

19. It should be emphasized that Scranton, like Stiegler, is addressing his critique principally to West-led global capitalism. Care needs to be taken that a call to asceticism does not serve to glorify the suffering of those who live in poverty, and whose carbon footprint is minimal due to their exclusion from access to sufficient food, infrastructure and energy resources. On this point, we find Climacus’s attention to questions of social justice especially instructive.

20. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 256.

21. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 257.

is not to shatter creatures but “to shatter the iron breastplate of habit.”<sup>22</sup> In *Anthropotechnics* the example of monastic thanatology thus leads Sloterdijk to take an approach to civilization similar to the one later adopted by Scranton, arguing that what the practicing life “ends” is not Western civilization as such but rather its destructive lifeways. The aim is not anarchy but the “immunization” of communities against destructive habits. “Humanity,” he concludes, “presses for a macrostructure of global immunization: co-immunism”: “Civilization is one such structure. Its monastic rules must be drawn up now or never; they will encode the forms of anthropotechnics that befit existence in the context of all contexts. Wanting to live by them would mean making a decision: to take on the good habit of shared survival in daily exercises.”<sup>23</sup>

Sloterdijk’s concept of thanatology as an immune-building exercise is essential for understanding Scranton’s essay in the long tradition of practicing death. When illustrating what it means to practice for death in the Anthropocene, Scranton uses the image of the ascetic as an “aberrant anti-drone slow-dancing to its own rhythm . . . continually self-immunizing against the waves of social energy we live in and amongst by perpetually interrupting its own connection to collective life.”<sup>24</sup> Scranton also refers directly to Sloterdijk’s philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Like Sloterdijk, he does not think of the ascetic as opposed to the collective. Community is a persistent, albeit undeveloped, theme in *Learning to Die*, which hints that without a sense for something more than the self, the idea of letting go of the ego becomes very difficult if not impossible to perform. Thus Scranton appeals to the intrinsic value of life and to a panhuman “responsibility to and participation in a larger collective self,” even suggesting the desirability of sacrificing oneself for others (as a soldier, commemorating his own death propelled Scranton to do his best “to make sure everyone else came back alive”).<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Sloterdijk, however, Scranton makes little reference to the Christian monastic tradition. On this point too, however, we can see Sloterdijk’s influence. While Sloterdijk’s *You Must Change Your Life* discusses many different forms of Christian asceticism (including the *ars moriendi* of Climacus), it gives to religion itself a very small role. Indeed, Sloterdijk writes that “no ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ exist, only misunderstood regimens,” suggesting, in his reading of Climacus, that it is possible to “dispense” with a “full description” of monastic psychology when considering the *Ladder*.<sup>27</sup>

It is in response to Sloterdijk’s summary account of Climacus that we now propose to read the *Ladder*. Sloterdijk’s desire to avoid a religious interpretation of asceticism

22. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 258.

23. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 452. Sloterdijk coins the term *anthropotechnics* to describe the tools with which human beings not only alter their self-images to free themselves from destructive habits but also establish generative habits in the name of group survival and co-species flourishing.

24. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 87.

25. See, for instance, Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 27, 136.

26. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 93, 22.

27. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 3, 259; emphasis in the original.

nonetheless leads to a selective reading of the *ars moriendi* that brackets important questions about what it means to die to the self in a time of environmental crisis. In Scranton's essay, these factors surface as queries regarding a person's perseverance on the ascetic path, for instance, how to deal with the experience of failure. The *Ladder*, because of its attention to psychological states, perceptions, and habits of thought, gives an instructive picture of what the process of learning to die might look like, and we argue that it ought not be overlooked when considering environmental readings of the *ars moriendi*.

## 2. The Thanatological Psychagogy of John Climacus's *Ladder*

Climacus wrote the *Ladder* near the end of his life, circa 600 CE, after forty years of hermitage and during his time as abbot of the central monastery at Sinai. He takes the biblical image of the ladder from Jacob's dream (Gen. 28:10–19) and recasts it as an ascetic training program—divided into thirty chapters or “rungs,” representing Christ's life leading up to his baptism—and as a vade mecum, supporting the process of becoming a Christian.<sup>28</sup> The monastic life serves as a guiding “light for all men.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the *Ladder* was written for a broad audience of religious and laypersons alike and was a hugely popular text, especially during the medieval period.<sup>30</sup>

At the center of this popular manual is the *ars moriendi*. The *Ladder* was instrumental in elaborating with practices a concept that plays only a secondary role in Greek philosophy: “meditating on death.” Chapter 6 of the *Ladder*, “On Remembrance of Death,” compares the practice to thought that precedes speech and praises it as “the most essential of all works.”<sup>31</sup> For the expression “remembrance of death” (*mnemes thanatou*), Climacus refers to the Stoics and Platonists, who “describe philosophy as a meditation on death” (*meleten thanatou*), and to a verse from Ecclesiasticus: “Remember your last end, and you will never sin.”<sup>32</sup> Remembrance of death produces a change in a person's habits. A person who is reminded of their mortality is less easily persuaded by their own importance: remembrance of death encourages humility and prevents hubris. Remembrance of death, then, is not to be confused with a *desire* for death, nor is it identical to vanquishing the ordinary feeling of being “frightened of dying.”<sup>33</sup> The point is neither to desire death nor to become insensitive to suffering but to learn to confront mortality without fear, in such a way that it becomes possible to live unencumbered by attachments that impede a free existence. Free existence, in turn, is defined as a life lived according to charity or love, meaning a communal life of interdependency and giving. Readers of the *Ladder* are to embrace poverty and attend to the poor. For this reason, it

28. See Völker, *Scala Paradisi*; Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*; Müller, *Das Konzept geistlichen Gehorsams*; Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*.

29. Climacus, *Ladder*, 234.

30. Zecher, *Role of Death*, 7.

31. Climacus, *Ladder*, 132.

32. Climacus, *Ladder*, 135, quoting Eccles. 7:36.

33. Climacus, *Ladder*, 132.

is less important to think about one's mortality than it is to let go of attachments: "The man who has died to all things remembers death."<sup>34</sup>

Climacus also offers the conceptual framework necessary for discerning those destructive habits that complicate the *ars moriendi*. Above all, the ascetic needs to understand that not all is lost when one fails; in fact, it is precisely through experiencing failure that it becomes possible to experience humility and follow Christ. Climacus has concrete advice for the one who experiences despair, recommending, for instance, the so-called Jesus-prayer (a single-phrase prayer that is to be said in rhythm with the breath). Moreover, Climacus knows that cultivating ascetic habits takes time, so he advises a gentle approach, as his clement remarks on fasting show. Climacus is also keenly aware of the temptation that comes hand in hand with successful self-discipline: the one who manages to fast for a long time becomes proud, and even the one who fights off feelings of pride with ease is at risk of confusing the means of asceticism with its end. Climacus intersperses the *Ladder* with constant admonishments and reminders that humans are not, in fact, masters of anything but rather dependent on all things: "What have you got that you did not receive as a gift either from God or as a result of the help and prayers of others?"<sup>35</sup> While the *ars moriendi* can be compared to a tool kit, then, it is somewhat different from the spiritual "fist-fight" described by Sloterdijk. Learning to die according to Climacus is not only about developing the weapons necessary to obliterate bad habits. At a deeper level, it aims at cultivating those good habits mentioned (but not elaborated) by Sloterdijk: a heightened sense of one's frailty, vulnerability, and dependency on others; an attentiveness to and regard for one's cocreators.

This sense of the *ars moriendi* as a lesson in humility rather than mastery is emphasized by the structure of the text of the *Ladder*. The "rungs" of the *Ladder* can be grouped into three successive sections: the first part initiates the break with the world (rungs 1–3), the extensive second part focuses on the *vita activa*, or "active life," with its fundamental virtues and opposing vices (rungs 4–26), and the last three rungs address the *vita contemplativa*, or "contemplative life," of communion with God. While the break with the world in the beginning appears to be accomplished relatively easily, the turn to a self-denying and humble existence is not achieved once and for all. Instead, it is a continuous process with many temptations, setbacks, and failures.

Above all, the art of dying is never mastered: one continues to be a student until one's death. The process is described as taking place in three steps. First, one is to make a habit of imagining oneself as the corpse one will become. This leads to, second, an unceasing awareness of the impending postmortem divine judgment. Third, one prepares oneself through constantly putting to death one's destructive behaviors and habits. Learning to die is thus both a contemplation on death and mortality and a performance of death continually recapitulated as an active dying-to-self and a letting go

34. Climacus, *Ladder*, 135.

35. Climacus, *Ladder*, 84; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7.



of previously held beliefs, and it is the latter that is the most important. As Zecher observes, practicing the *ars moriendi* gives rise to an intensified *modus vivendi*, or “way of living”: “This side of mortality has never before been so highlighted as Climacus does. . . . Memory of judgment and death . . . shows the ascetic’s situation not as it already is, but as it is always becoming, shaped by the past, but not yet solidified by death, and so always open to repentance and progress.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, while remembrance of death is a skill that must be learned, it is unlike other skills in that remembrance of death is never perfected in life but becomes, as it were, the form of life itself. This is illustrated vividly in the section immediately preceding the chapter on practicing for death, “On Penitence.” Climacus describes penitence, *metanoia*, as an act of continued mourning over destructive human habits, and as a continuous practice: “*Metanoia* is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself.”<sup>37</sup> He uses an anecdote to show what he means. Once, Climacus tells his monks, he spent thirty days in a special monastery, a “holy prison,” where inmates were held captive not by an external force but by conscience and their grief at the magnitude of human error. In Climacus’s story, the “failing confidence” of the inmates is a recurrent theme. The inmates are penitent in every possible way and yet they are never confident nor complacent.<sup>38</sup> When the subject is the magnitude of destructive human habits, mourning does not stop after a prescribed time; there is no point at which satisfaction is reached, for reproach cannot be canceled by good works: “How could we make up for all that we owe, even if we had the entire world there to weep for us?”<sup>39</sup> The task is to guard against the comforting illusion that ascetic exercises might be making one better than other people.

For this reason, Climacus places hubris at the heart of those beliefs that lead to destructive habits: the meditation on pride and vainglory constitutes two rungs of the ladder. Humility is the core virtue; all other virtues, such as chastity and obedience, are in vain without it—“where there is no humility, all is rotten.”<sup>40</sup>

### 3. An Environmental Reading of Climacus’s *Ars Moriendi*

We will now offer an environmental reading of Climacus’s *ars moriendi*. This will help to flesh out the parallel Scranton and Sloterdijk draw between ascetic self-renunciation and ecological thinking while also challenging their interpretations of what it means to die to the self in an epoch of species extinction caused by anthropogenic climate change.

The intense degree of humility emphasized by Climacus in the *Ladder* is largely missing in the contemporary accounts of the *ars moriendi* by Sloterdijk and Scranton that we have been discussing. Scranton’s ascetic, modeled on the soldier, ultimately

36. Zecher, *Role of Death*, 201–2.

37. Climacus, *Ladder*, 121.

38. Climacus, *Ladder*, 125.

39. Climacus, *Ladder*, 123.

40. Climacus, *Ladder*, 221.

achieves a heightened sense of individual human agency. In an important sense, Scranton's argument is thus humanistic: "[the Anthropocene] calls for a reimagined humanism."<sup>41</sup> In *Learning to Die*, the face in the mirror of the Humvee that looks back at the soldier only almost paralyzed him; instead, it instilled in Scranton the conviction that he had it in his power "to make sure everyone else came back alive."<sup>42</sup> Arguably, renewed trust in one's ability and enduring strength are valuable characteristics when it comes to environmental activism. They may also, however, reinforce the naturally occurring "optimism bias" hardwired into human psychology in unhelpful ways.<sup>43</sup> Climacus's ascetic program, by contrast, resists individualism and, on the matter of human agency, is closer to posthumanism, as we shall come to shortly. It is also inseparable from questions of social justice, as Climacus's remarks on caring for the poor indicate.<sup>44</sup> One important argument against the emphasis on individual conscience in environmental ethics has been that Cartesian models of human agency as disembodied and free-floating detract from the global commons and the urgent need to mobilize collective action.<sup>45</sup> This is a question that Climacus's idea of spiritual progress addresses in interesting ways by presenting self-scrutiny as a practice of becoming more aware of one's dependency on other beings, and of shaping life around mutual care.

In particular, creaturely codependence is a theme that comes to the fore in the psychology presented by the *Ladder* regarding the way in which humans relate not only to other humans but to "nature" (*phusis*). At first blush, though, the context in which we find this discussion seems removed from environmental concerns. The practice of "dying to all things" implies an ambiguous relationship to body and matter. This world-denying attitude is often remarked on as a deeply fraught aspect of Christian asceticism from an environmental point of view.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, principal among the things to which the monk must die is *phusis*, a word that Climacus uses interchangeably with "world" (*cosmos*) to refer to the whole created order. Hatred of nature is a recurrent theme in the *Ladder*, which repeatedly encourages the monk to die not only to the self but to matter: "withdrawal from the world [*cosmou*] is a willing hatred of all that is materially prized, a denial of nature [*phuseos*] for the sake of what is above nature [*phusin*]."<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the monk's body is to be deprived of sleep and food, and exposed to extreme heat and cold, to kill the "serpent of sensuality [that] has many faces."<sup>48</sup> In this context, dying to

41. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 1, cf. 19–24.

42. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 822, cf. 21.

43. Cf. Beattie et al., "Staying Over-Optimistic."

44. The relationship between Christian spirituality and social justice in the Anthropocene is the subject of a brilliant analysis in Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*. See also Northcott, *Political Theology of Climate Change*, although with less emphasis on the mystical tradition of contemplation that we are considering here. On asceticism and social justice in Greek orthodox asceticism, see Chryssavgis, "Spiritual Way."

45. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 132–33. For a criticism of Scranton on this score, see also Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 133–61.

46. Reuther, *Gaia and God*, 104–10.

47. Climacus, *Ladder*, 74.

48. Climacus, *Ladder*, 181.

the self leads to an indifference to the natural world. The meditation on chastity (*hagneias*) is central to the ascetic program—quite literally, as it is positioned on the fifteenth rung, that is, at the very midpoint of the *Ladder*. Its thematic scope exceeds sensuality. Chastity, Climacus says, is “a name common to all virtues,” and its essence is “to have the same feelings regarding animate and inanimate beings, rational and irrational.”<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, it is quite clear that Climacus holds physicality in awe, as when he advises his readers, in the chapter devoted to obedience, to “listen to the wisdom of God found in earthly vessels and marvel at it.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, nature is the monk’s teacher. Throughout the *Ladder* we see *phusis* derided but also praised, with the physical declared free of sin and aligned to God: “A friend of God is the one who lives in communion with all that is natural and free from sin and who does not neglect to do what good he can.”<sup>51</sup> One likely explanation for this recognition of matter is to be sought in the ascetic practice of relating to nature through contemplation.

Although Climacus does not mention *phusike theoria*, or “contemplation of nature,” there are evident parallels between Climacus’s sense of *phusis* in these passages and the way in which nature is described by other patristic writers such as Maximos the Confessor (ca. 580–662 CE). As Bruce Foltz has shown, for Maximos, as for ascetic theology at large, the monk advances on the path toward God, the eternal Logos, through contemplation of the distributed Logoi hidden within earthly beings.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, however, the discernment of nature’s inner meaning is not separated from the life of the ordinary senses. Rather, it is a question of what Foltz describes as an attunement of material *phusis* to inner or hidden *phusis*. Foltz observes that descriptions of *phusike theoria* distinguish between three different ways of perceiving nature: “humanly,” dealing only with the sensual aspects of created things, or the way in which things feel and appear to me; “demonically,” approaching them under the dictate of the passions, reflecting the way in which a person might use things to satisfy desires; and “angelically,” through a kind of seeing that recognizes the divine in every existing thing and acknowledges the irreducibility of creatures to the perceiver’s gaze.<sup>53</sup> To contemplate nature in this tradition, then, does not mean simply looking. It means, first, identifying what might be harmful and destructive about one’s existing way of seeing and then cultivating alternative modes of perception. In the context of monastic psychology, this

49. Climacus, *Ladder*, 172.

50. Climacus, *Ladder*, 100.

51. Climacus, *Ladder*, 74.

52. Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*. *Phusis* in classical Greek may refer to growth or genesis, the physical material of the world, but also to an immaterial internal organizing principle or structure, as in “human nature” (Peeters, *Greek Philosophical Terms*, 158 [s.v. “physis”]). One possible interpretation of the *Ladder* is that when Climacus is deriding *phusis*, he is referring to matter, and when he is praising *phusis*, he is speaking of the internal organizing principle of matter.

53. Foltz, *Noetics of Nature*, 158–74; cf. Nordlander, “Green Purpose”; Sherman, “Reading the Book of Nature.”

meant above all scrutinizing habitual conceptions of what nature was according to the human (and demonic) modes of perception before developing an angelic approach. In other words, *phusike theoria* required an initial act of self-renunciation, but that act of self-renunciation would also entail a letting go of specific, self-serving ways of thinking about nature. In this context, learning to look at the world angelically meant learning to hate the world as it appeared to human (that is, self-serving) perception.<sup>54</sup>

These distinct levels of perception, and the tensions between them, seem to be implicit also in the *Ladder*. Climacus is concerned to bring what Foltz identifies as the demonic and human perception of nature to the attention of the ascetic. This explains the ambiguity and, *prima facie*, the contradictions that can be found in the *Ladder's* approach to nature. In this context, it is not nature as such to which the monk dies, but those perceptions or ways of looking at nature that lead to destructive behavior and tragic consequences for the created world in question. On its own, nature is not evil; evil is the result of human misuse of nature, of humans relating to nature as merely resources to be used to self-serving ends: "evil or passion is not something naturally implanted in things."<sup>55</sup> Rather, "we have taken natural attributes of our own and turned them into passions."<sup>56</sup> Reading Climacus in the context of the wider phenomenon of ascetic *phusike theoria* thus explains in more detail how dying-to-self relates to the practice of attentiveness at stake in the arguments of Scranton and Sloterdijk. In Climacus's program, remembrance of death is inseparable from the ability to marvel at and learn from "earthly vessels." This is because dying-to-self involves not only the ending of specific human stories about the self and its significance but the resituating of the self in the world, as Pierre Hadot once wrote of spiritual exercises in antiquity: "at [the] point [of contemplation] one no longer lives in the usual, conventional human world, but the world of nature."<sup>57</sup> Concretely, it is a question of changing the habits that facilitate exploitation, mastery, and domination.

Like the tradition of Greek ascetical theology studied by Foltz, Climacus holds creation in high esteem so long as it is perceived in a way that takes leave of self-serving motivations through an initial act of self-renunciation. However, unlike other ascetical theologians, such as Maximos, Climacus does not spend overlong extolling nature as contemplated by the ascetic.<sup>58</sup> Yet given the key role of self-renunciation in achieving

54. It should be pointed out here that, in Patristic literature, the angelic is not less natural than the human (or the demonic); rather, the angelic is viewed as being closer to nature because of its freedom from self-serving desires. In the context of environmental ethics, what is at issue in Patristic literature is the distinction between seeing nature at a remove from the self and seeing it as constitutive of the self. In contemporary industrialized meat production, for instance, nonhuman creatures are objectified, facilitating overconsumption and brutal treatment by humans. The problem of nature as objectified "stuff" has been discussed at length by feminist critics, who recommend alternative accounts of nature drawn from mystical and vitalist philosophies (see Merchant, *Death of Nature*). Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for alerting us to this comparison.

55. Climacus, *Ladder*, 238.

56. Climacus, *Ladder*, 251.

57. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.

58. On the praise of cosmos and nature in Maximos, see Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*.

*phusike theoria*, this does not diminish the significance of the *Ladder* from an environmental point of view. To the contrary, since *phusike theoria* is impossible without self-renunciation, the *Ladder* complements the environmentalism of patristic mystagogy with an all-important psychagogy. These are only some of the ways in which a closer reading of the monastic psychology of Climacus can both deepen and challenge environmental interpretations of asceticism's most striking practice: remembrance of death. Monastic psychology is not incidental to asceticism, nor can theological or religious matters be dismissed out of hand when we grapple with the relevance of the *ars moriendi* in the Anthropocene. In the case of Climacus, the practical advice contained in the *Ladder* is impossible to separate from religious narratives and theological concepts. Climacus offers a *modus vivendi* that is, pace an otherworldly orientation or dualism, deeply environmental in its consequences: it uncompromisingly demands a relentless self-scrutiny of the habits we today call consumerist.

#### 4. A Posthumanist Ontology for Spiritual Exercises in the Anthropocene

For Climacus, dying to the self becomes a question of learning to let go of the idea that being human comes with specific privileges. Indeed, being human is just one way of being a creature. In what follows, we will be comparing our reading of Climacus's asceticism to posthumanism's project of articulating an antispeciesist ethics.

Posthumanism covers a broad spectrum of perspectives and theoretical approaches. Cary Wolfe identifies two senses of posthumanism: posthumanism as a mode of thought based on systems theory, poststructuralism, and pragmatism; and posthumanism as addressing, critically, the problem of anthropocentrism and deconstructing the value hierarchies associated with creaturely differences.<sup>59</sup> Rosi Braidotti defines what she calls the "critical posthuman subject" as a "relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity."<sup>60</sup> Braidotti follows Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza, in which, ultimately, pluralism and monism become identical.<sup>61</sup> From microbes and stones to plants and animals, everything exists in interdependence, and a human being is just one among many manifestations of the generative power that Braidotti calls *zoe* (from the Greek word for life).

As a vitality that transcends the distinction of life and death, *zoe* is central to Braidotti's account of a posthuman ethics. For this reason, she opposes all approaches that take mortality and finitude as constituting the horizon for the discussion of a good life.<sup>62</sup>

59. See Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xviiiif.

60. Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 49.

61. Cf. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, x. Braidotti describes her understanding of a "monistic universe" as referring to "Spinoza's central concept that matter, the world and humans are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal or external opposition," and this "emphasis on the unity of all matter . . . is reinforced by an updated scientific understanding of the self-organizing or 'smart' structure of living matter" (Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 56, 57). Braidotti reads Spinoza through the lens of Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.

62. Cf. Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 121.

“Death is overrated,” Braidotti writes. Braidotti invites us to reimagine the “ultimate subtraction” that ends our abilities to experience ourselves as merely another form of the “interconnectedness” of matter.<sup>63</sup> Yet while Braidotti questions the elevation of death in modern philosophy (particularly in the work of Heidegger), her focus on the end of the human has bearing on the ascetic approaches we have been considering here. Braidotti, too, values the cathartic potential of the remembrance of death and provokes readers to confront their individual end: “Too bad that the relentless generative powers of death require the suppression of that which is the nearest and dearest to me, namely myself, my own vital being-there.”<sup>64</sup>

The Spinozist-Deleuzian understanding of becoming on which Braidotti bases her understanding of *zoe* is shorn of anthropocentrism (insofar as this is possible). It is through the bracketing of individualistic, free-floating subjectivity that the return to life-as-it-is (*zoe*) is initiated. The theoretical account Braidotti offers of her posthumanism is shot through with performative elements. This is an ontology that is supposed to be put into practice. Following Deleuze, Braidotti writes about how imaginative exercises in “becoming insect” and “becoming imperceptible” reach deep down into human lifeways and awaken the life in us “that does not answer to my name.”<sup>65</sup> This drive to life, however, ultimately is identical with the longing for a kind of death. Life, for Braidotti, regenerates itself through the creation and completion of a plethora of individual life cycles, expressing the fact that the potency of life at some points requires becoming a corpse, that is, it requires merging with the web of nonhuman forces in the process of organic putrefaction, composting, and regeneration. Hence the paradox at the core of Braidotti’s posthumanist ethics: “while at the conscious level all of us struggle for survival, at some deeper level of our conscious structures, all we long for is to lie silently and let time wash over us in the perfect stillness of not-life.”<sup>66</sup> Through an imaginative exercise in anticipating our physical death, Braidotti reworks the horrors associated with our decomposition to kindle “the vital powers of healing and compassion.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, the aim of her posthumanism is not the obliteration and devaluation of the human being but rather the development of a “*zoe* ethics of sustainable transformation,” which would situate human beings firmly in the mesh of nonhuman life and thus end consumerist, exploitative habits where such have become inveterate.<sup>68</sup>

The descriptions of surrendering the self to become one with *zoe* carry mystical overtones. Braidotti herself, however, poses her spirituality in strict opposition to the “mysticism in the sentimental mode dear to Christianity,” which she, with subtle reference to Climacus’s *Ladder*, regards as offering nothing more than “a stepping stone to

63. Braidotti, “Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible,” 144, 147.

64. Braidotti, “Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible,” 144.

65. Braidotti, “Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible,” 139.

66. Braidotti, “Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible,” 152.

67. Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 132.

68. Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 121.

the data-bank in the sky's final cashing-in-point for our existential frequent-flyer program."<sup>69</sup> By contrast, Braidotti casts her zoe ethics as precluding any "metaphysical life-insurance politics"; rather, it is to be genuinely concerned with "gratuitous acts of kindness"—a love that is radically untethered from self-interest because it transcends the individuality of existence.<sup>70</sup> But Braidotti's reservation against the selfish motivation of the ascetic to escape the eternal damnation on Judgment Day is only to a certain extent justified. When we examined Climacus's ascetic practices in detail, we noticed that fear is an acceptable motivation only at the beginning. During the course of the ascetic training, the self of the practicing changes, and with it, the motivation to keep training. Notably, the last rung on the ladder is love—a love that is devoid of all sense of self-sufficiency. In the context of the Christian theology in which the *Ladder* was written, this love is God who created all things and continues to infuse creation with divine presence (cf. 1 John 4:16). Hence, the ascetic's aim—union with God—is also communion with earthly life, as we have seen earlier.

Braidotti's posthumanism and Climacus's monastic psychagogy are separated by one and a half millennia. Beyond doubt, their lifeworlds vary significantly, and these differences are mirrored in their texts. Still, when read together, they can help us to approach the task of constructing an account of asceticism and spiritual exercises that speaks to the children of the Anthropocene. In particular, they are helpful when addressing the tension that appears in contemporary environmental philosophy between the appeal to asceticism and spiritual exercises, on the one hand, and the willingness to engage deeply with the full depth of ascetic and spiritual practices, on the other. Love for life as cosmic force as described by Braidotti is a mysterious thing that perhaps is not so different from divine selfless love as presented by Climacus. The latter, however, might be better able to argue why human beings have the supranatural capability to decide to refrain from self-interest out of *species-exceeding* love. While one can observe what one might call self-sacrifice in animals, it usually happens for their offspring or pack (i.e., it is motivated by instinct). Their behavior does not extend to other species. Still, the theme of "dying to contribute to a life beyond one's own" is, as environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III notes, "everywhere in the plot."<sup>71</sup> And it is only in humankind that this life-giving process of self-emptying becomes a matter of a conscious choice. For theologians like Sallie McFague, the Cross is the symbol of such voluntary self-emptying. She understands God not as a substance but as kenotic love. And since human beings are created in God's image, they are able to decisively engage in acts of self-giving works of love. Operating with the same ontological framework as Climacus (the human being as *imago Dei*) and accounting for the curious fact that "the possibility of kenotic self-limitation in humans reaches levels without precedent in prehuman nature," the work of Rolston and McFague exemplifies that the Christian approach to

69. Braidotti, "Ethics Becoming-Imperceptible," 157.

70. Braidotti, "Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible," 157.

71. Rolston, "Kenosis and Nature," 60.

practicing death has much more to offer for Braidotti's ethics than one would expect at first sight.<sup>72</sup> For what is demanded "is not the soul's resting in the divine being, but the daily embodiment of the imitation of God in self-emptying love for others"—and McFague explicitly includes here the nonhuman other, the whole of creation.<sup>73</sup>

There are fascinating similarities between Climacus's and Braidotti's understandings of love. At first sight, however, the love that Climacus has in mind displays an inherent contradiction similar to Braidotti's paradoxical marriage of blissful "not-self" with affectivity. Climacus writes that the one who is "totally unstirred by any body, any color or any beauty" is truly blessed.<sup>74</sup> The highly praised virtue of poverty implies that one ought not be affected by the physical world, either positively or negatively. Poverty culminates in "resignation from care."<sup>75</sup> Environmental thinkers usually read expressions like these with a sense of alarm. When applied to today's ecological disasters, care certainly is necessary for environmental action and, in general, for a *modus vivendi* that avoids inflicting harm on the environment. How does this fit together with Climacus's emphasis on ever-growing love, and on the need to attend to environments?

The idea of resigning from care needs to be understood as an exercise in dying to the perception of the natural world as a warehouse of goods for human consumption. Thus, the dispassionate view on nature that Climacus advocates is freedom from worries regarding individual survival. As Braidotti writes, "it is the inhuman in us which frees us to life."<sup>76</sup> For Climacus, resignation from care means more—not less—attentiveness toward creatures, environments, and social injustices. Hence, the Christian ascetic's indifference to the world is not the same as disregard. Climacus's emphasis that "love has no boundary and both in the present and in the future age we will never cease to progress in it" supports an ecological reading of the *Ladder*, pointing to an unfinished love that exceeds all limitations humans might put on it.<sup>77</sup> Such love holds the potential to extend itself to the creaturely world, that is, it can be directed downward as much as upward.

This concluding comparison with posthumanist thought shows some of the ways in which it is possible to read John Climacus's asceticism in and for the Anthropocene. For this reason, we find it curious that the text with which we began—Scranton's *Learning to Die*—makes no mention of Climacus or Christian asceticism. Sloterdijk's *On Anthropotechnics*, by contrast, did make the connection with Climacus, yet Sloterdijk argued that the psychology presented by the *Ladder* was not essential to grasping the ecophilosophical potential of Christian asceticism. What we have found, however, is that the analysis Climacus gives of the stages involved in dying-to-self is rich and attentive to the everyday struggles such practices entail. Rather than negligible, we find Climacus's psychology

72. Rolston, "Kenosis and Nature," 63.

73. McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 154.

74. Climacus, *Ladder*, 172.

75. Climacus, *Ladder*, 189.

76. Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 134.

77. Climacus, *Ladder*, 251.



invaluable, something we show by comparing it to the posthumanist ethics of Braidotti. Despite the centuries that separate Climacus's asceticism from contemporary ecophilosophy, Climacus's project is a critical resource for philosophers today seeking alternative accounts of agency with which to question the geopolitical legacy of the self-possessed Cartesian subject. Moreover, the emphasis on a practical application of dying-to-self, and the lived experience on which Climacus builds his asceticism, offers a fresh perspective that may help to deepen ecophilosophical appeals to asceticism and spiritual exercises today. Many of Climacus's observations read as uncannily apt commentaries on overconsumption, for instance, when he addresses the difference between recognizing detrimental habits and changing the behavior that makes those habits possible: "The insensitive man . . . talks about healing a wound and does not stop making it worse. . . . He prays against it but carries on as before, doing it and being angry with himself. . . . He talks profoundly about death and acts as if he will never die."<sup>78</sup> This is why we argue that thinking with Climacus will aid contemporary philosophers in developing an asceticism for the children of the Anthropocene.

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78. Climacus, *Ladder*, 101.

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