Is IR going extinct?

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Abstract
A global extinction crisis may threaten the survival of most existing life forms. Influential discourses of ‘existential risk’ suggest that human extinction is a real possibility, while several decades of evidence from conservation biology suggests that the Earth may be entering a ‘sixth mass extinction event’. These conditions threaten the possibilities of survival and security that are central to most branches of International Relations. However, this discipline lacks a framework for addressing (mass) extinction. From notions of ‘nuclear winter’ and ‘omnicide’ to contemporary discourses on catastrophe, International Relations thinking has treated extinction as a superlative of death. This is a profound category mistake: extinction needs to be understood not in the ontic terms of life and death, but rather in the ontological context of be(com)ing and negation. Drawing on the work of theorists of the ‘inhuman’ such as Quentin Meillassoux, Claire Colebrook, Ray Brassier, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Nigel Clark, this article provides a pathway for thinking beyond existing horizons of survival and imagines a profound transformation of International Relations. Specifically, it outlines a mode of cosmopolitics that responds to the element of the inhuman and the forces of extinction. Rather than capitulating to narratives of tragedy, this cosmopolitics would make it possible to think beyond the restrictions of existing norms of ‘humanity’ to embrace an ethics of gratitude and to welcome the possibility of new worlds, even in the face of finitude.

Keywords
Biopolitics, extinction, International Relations theory, ontology, posthumanism, survival

Introduction

I think the odds are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilisation on Earth will survive to the end of the present century … what happens here on Earth, in this century, could conceivably make the difference between a near eternity filled with ever more complex and subtle forms of life and one filled with nothing but base matter. (Rees, 2003: 7)
Sir Martin Rees, the renowned scientist and UK Astronomer Royal, made this statement at the turn of the 21st century. Troubled by a gathering vortex of potential threats — including nuclear terrorism, designer viruses, artificial intelligence and asteroids — he felt compelled to issue this ‘scientist’s warning’ to the public. Rees is a major figure in the field of ‘existential risk’, which contends that humans face the threat of extinction from a broad range of technological, ecological and social forces. However, it is not just *homo sapiens* that faces the threat of annihilation; since the 1980s, ecologists and conservation biologists have warned that sharp increases in extinction rates may plunge the Earth into a ‘sixth mass extinction event’ within just a few centuries. This, in turn, would cause the collapse not only of food security, the economy and human societies, but of all existing ecosystems. As extreme as they may sound, these scenarios are not science fiction plots; there is increasing evidence that they are real threats to life on Earth. They fundamentally challenge the possibility of security and survival, striking at the core concerns of International Relations (IR). Indeed, although (mass) extinction has implications for most, if not all, modern sciences, IR is one of a few disciplines that are explicitly and profoundly occupied with the issue of survival on a global scale. As such, it should be able to respond to mass extinction in a constructive and meaningful way if it is to remain relevant in its own terms. However, in its current form, IR offers no frameworks for addressing (mass) extinction — in order to do so, it must undergo a profound transformation. Is such a transformation possible and desirable?

This article begins by exploring the nature of (mass) extinction. Specifically, it moves beyond empirical accounts that frame extinction in terms of large-scale death and reframes it as an ontological phenomenon. Drawing on theories of ‘weak ontology’, it suggests that extinction is neither a matter of transcendent metaphysics nor reducible to biological processes; rather, it is concerned with the be(com)ing and non-being of collective life forms. Using this theoretical framework, it assesses treatments of extinction across a range of branches of IR across its recent history: theory, strategic studies, international ethics, policymaking and security. In each case, it argues, extinction is framed only in ontic terms, as a problem of life, death and biopolitical management. Within these frameworks, the ontological significance of (mass) extinction is rendered unthinkable. To demonstrate that IR can and should think extinction the article engages with conceptions of the ‘inhuman’. The concept of the inhuman makes it possible to think beyond existing forms of ‘humanity’ and its relations with other beings to conditions of existence that bear no relation to this form of life. It also seeks to dismantle normative taboos that preclude serious discussion of extinction on the misleading charge of misanthropy.

This analysis suggests that IR can and should confront (mass) extinction in a thorough and serious way if it is to remain relevant as a discipline concerned with survival. However, what kind of IR would this produce, and would it be desirable? The article concludes by outlining the new political possibilities opened up if IR makes a serious engagement with (mass) extinction. Specifically, it outlines a form of ‘cosmopolitics’ attuned to the nonhuman and inhuman forces and conditions of the universe. By relinquishing the imperative to secure existing human life at all costs and by embracing an ethics rooted in futural and retroactive gratitude, this cosmopolitics opens up profound political possibilities. For instance, it defamiliarizes norms of ‘humanity’ rooted in
essentialisms such as race, sex and gender, and it fosters modes of solidarity and collective action oriented towards welcoming future life forms. In so doing, it radically shifts the orientation of politics from one of maintaining stasis to one of welcoming new worlds, even in the face of finitude. This cosmopolitical vision can not only enable IR to address the global extinction crisis, but also to face, and transcend, its own conceptual, normative and ethical boundaries.

**An age of extinction?**

Does life on Earth have a long-term future? Several major discourses have begun to ask this question in a serious way, probing the real possibility of large-scale extinction. For instance, scholars of ‘existential risk’ contend that states and international institutions need to pay more attention to developments that ‘threaten the existence of our entire species’ (CSER, 2015). They examine a range of possible threats, from those arising from new technologies such as artificial intelligence, nano-technology and synthetic biology, to climate change, global pandemics, nuclear terrorism and even cosmic events such as asteroid strikes and gamma-ray bursts (Bostrom and Cirkovic, 2008). Although the probability of these events varies considerably, they each present a non-zero possibility that *homo sapiens* might go extinct. In other words, even if these events are of low probability, their consequences are enormous. Indeed, the philosopher Nick Bostrom insists that what is at stake in human extinction is not only the loss of currently existing lives, but also of all future human ‘happiness’ and potential. As such, he claims, ‘even the tiniest reduction of an existential risk has an expected value greater than that of the definite provision of any “ordinary” good, such as the direct benefit of saving 1 billion lives’ (Bostrom, 2013: 18). For this reason, scholars of existential risk seek to shift the register in which threat and the possibilities of survival are understood and governed globally. As Rees (2013: 1123) put it in a recent article:

> Those fortunate enough to live in the developed world fret too much about minor hazards of everyday life: improbable air crashes, possible carcinogens in food, low radiation doses, and so forth. But we should be more concerned about events that have not yet happened but which, if they occurred even once, could cause worldwide devastation.

Humans, however, are not the only species currently facing the possibility of extinction. Since the 1980s, biologists and ecologists have warned that sharply accelerating rates of extinction may mark the beginning of a new mass extinction event.\(^1\) In contrast to the cosmological and biological causes of previous mass extinctions (for instance, asteroid strikes and the rapid production of atmospheric oxygen by cyanobacteria), this global extinction crisis is driven by anthropogenic change — in particular, climate change, habitat destruction, direct killing and the transfer of species across the planet. In combination, these phenomena have driven species extinction rates well above the ‘background rate’,\(^2\) leading to significant decreases in diversity globally and across all major taxa. For instance, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF, 2014) recently reported a 52% decrease in over 10,380 populations of 3,038 vertebrate species (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish) between 1970 and 2010 alone. Anthony Barnosky and his colleagues (2011: 60) claim that current extinction rates ‘could be severe enough to carry extinction
magnitudes to the Big Five benchmark in as little as three centuries’, while other studies suggest that even these estimates may be too conservative (Ceballos et al., 2015; Régnier et al., 2015). Several prominent scientists and science journalists working in the area of mass extinction have provided dismal pictures of the security implications of these trends. They depict global crises in food security and economic stability (Barnosky, 2014); an imminent ‘penumbral’ age of population decimation, authoritarian governance and global warfare over dwindling resources (Oreskes and Conway, 2014); and even the forced exile of humans to other planets (Newitz, 2013).

Arising from multiple disciplines, methodologies and research agendas, these discourses suggest that extinction is a serious problem with which IR needs to contend. While (mass) extinction has potential implications for all disciplines, IR is fundamentally concerned with survival — precisely the condition that is bounded and threatened by (mass) extinction. Whether or not the technological threats discussed by theorists of existential risks come to pass, or whether the definitional threshold of a mass extinction event3 is passed, these discourses place in question the practical possibilities of ensuring survival through human intervention. Is IR, as it stands, conceptually equipped to confront a global extinction crisis?

To address this question, it is necessary to get a firm grasp on the nature of extinction. The discourses outlined earlier discuss extinction as a form of death writ large. Yet, they also imply that the concept of ‘extinction’ does a different kind of work than that of ‘death’. For instance, Bostrom’s claim that ensuring the survival of ‘humanity’ is more important than saving ‘1 billion [human] lives’ suggests that the difference between extinction and death is qualitative, not simply a matter of quantitative scale. Likewise, the deep concern of ecologists about a potential mass extinction suggests that the enormity of such an event exceeds the aggregation of individual deaths, or the elimination of particular species. In this sense, one might argue that extinction is ‘something more’ than death, that it involves the conditions of being — in short, that it is ontological rather than ontic. However, in what sense, and to what extent, can one make this claim?

Not a matter of life and death: (Weak) Ontology and (mass) extinction

To answer this question, we need to have a strong sense of what is at stake in extinction. Contemporary discourses on conservation suggest that taxonomic categories such as species are the beings lost or destroyed by extinction (see Mitchell, 2016). These categories and concepts are treated as ‘real’, bounded objects that transcend individual organisms and form part of a universal order (‘biodiversity’). This approach echoes principles of the Great Chain of Being, a concept rooted in Aristotelian theory and dominant until the European middle ages, which understood species as bounded components of a metaphysical order, and their loss as a rupture within it (Bergson, 2014; Wilkins, 2009). Despite the reliance of conservation discourses on the contemporary biological sciences, this approach is strangely at odds with virtually all post-Darwinian accounts of evolution, which suggest that the fundamental alteration and extinction of species are integral to speciation. In addition, recent critiques of the dominant biological species concept4
show that the collectivities demarcated as ‘species’ are, in fact, porous, fluid, malleable and in the process of constant transformation (see Haraway, 2008; Hird, 2008). For this reason, it makes little sense to adopt an ontology in which species are understood in transcendent terms — that is, as categories of being. Yet, it is not ‘just’ individual organisms or random agglomerations thereof that are at stake in the face of extinction.

Instead, I would argue, what is at stake in extinction is life forms: beings whose particular relations (with beings like and unlike themselves), morphology, life processes and sensory modalities drive them to alter their conditions in distinctive ways in order to survive collectively across time. In so doing, they generate distinctive histories and open-ended futures that are not fully contained in any moment of their unfolding (Bergson, 2014). For instance, Thom Van Dooren (2014: 22, 27) has recently reframed the concept of ‘species’ as ‘ways of being sustained through the work of successive generations of living beings … [through] skill, commitment, cooperation and hard work’. Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz (2004, 2011) has argued that the processes of speciation and evolution are open-ended, such that each life form contains multiple possible, indeterminate futures. Drawing on these insights, I shall use the term ‘extinction’ to refer to the destruction of these life forms, their unique histories and possibilities for realization.

What kind of ontology can help us to grasp life forms and their singular modes of being? Crucially, it cannot be an ontology that posits a sharp distinction, discontinuity or difference in kind between the ‘ontic’ (the realm of worldly experience) and the ‘ontological’ (the sphere of Being) (see Heidegger, 2010). For a life form to have ‘Being’ in this sense, it would need to transcend the worlds of everyday life and experience — the worlds in which life forms emerge, interact, relate, speciate and transform themselves over time. Instead, we need a conception of ontology that accounts for the being of life forms, which emerge from, traverse and transform the world without entirely transcending it. As Henri Bergson (2014) put it, life transforms the planet by introducing contingency to matter and initiating processes of creative evolution. In so doing, it asserts a particular mode of being that transcends the life and death of organisms while remaining in, and (trans)forming, the worlds they inhabit.

To grasp this idea, we can draw on Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1996, 2008) concept of ‘transimmanence’, which understands being in terms of movements across, instead of above, the world. In an ek-static framework, such as Heidegger’s, Being transcends the ontic by standing outside of the world. In contrast, for Nancy, beings ek-sist, or ‘stand out in’ being: they transcend the world in outward movement within it, not by ascending above it. Transimmanence is an impulse that constantly seeks diversity within the world, identifying and extending its boundaries and depth. It is neither wholly immanent nor completely transcendent, and it does not admit of a dichotomy between these two concepts. Rather, it moves through the plane of being in which the dynamics of interaction, speaking, play, knowing and sharing between bodies gives rise to modes of being that are more than the sum of the individual organisms that participate in them. These modes of being are not permanent or fixed; rather, they inhere in the process of becoming. In this sense, the mode of being of life forms is the capacity to life-form, that is, processes and events in which they form worlds through creative adaptation and evolution. It is this mode of being — and the diverse, singular modes of being that constitute it — that is at stake in extinction.
To grasp the being of life forms, we can also draw on William Connolly’s notion of ‘mundane transcendence’, which refers to the existence of intuitable but non-representable phenomena that partially transcend the world. Mundane transcendence is concerned not with the relation between beings and Being, but rather to that between be(com)ings and becoming (Connolly, 2011). For Connolly, existence is shaped not by a higher ‘purpose’ or plane of being, but rather by multiple forces of becoming, which may arrange themselves into ‘force-fields’ such as climate systems or, indeed, the intricate patterns of evolution. These phenomena stand out in the plane of being, shaping and rupturing it while remaining immanent to it. Connolly envisions the plane of being as one of ‘radical immanence’, ‘open to an eternity of time whose scope exceeds every force-field’ (Connolly, 2011: 38) in which beings and force-fields may last for extremely long periods of time, but never forever. In other words, the be(com)ings described by Connolly have an existence that is ‘something more’ than the sum of organisms and their biological processes. Nonetheless, it is neither immutable nor removed from the world or from the continuity of these processes of becoming.

Stuart White (2000) has coined the term ‘weak ontology’ to refer to accounts such as Connolly’s that affirm a concept of being while remaining fundamentally open to possibilities. Indeed, the term ‘weak ontology’ refers to a conception of being that is worldly, historical and contestable — and therefore mutable. From this perspective, it is possible to hold ontological commitments (e.g. the existence of distinct life forms) and to ground ethics upon them without being able, or necessarily desiring, to prove their certainty. I contend that a weak ontological stance allows us to distinguish between the lives and deaths of organisms and the being and becoming of life forms while remaining open to their indeterminate, worldly transformations. As such, when I call on IR to attend to (mass) extinction in ontological terms, it is the weak ontological notions of mundane transcendence and transimmanence that I have in mind. So, I am not suggesting that IR needs to become a Heideggerian ‘first science’ that makes claims to embody a universal science of Being, but nor should it be considered a ‘regional’ science concerned only with the lives and deaths of humans and some other organisms. Instead, I contend that IR should reject this sharp dichotomy, attuning itself instead to the transimmanent movements of being and becoming, and to the emergence and destruction of differences and singularities within the worldly plane. In keeping with this ontological shift, I shall distinguish between life, understood as a set of biological processes that sustain organisms, and the open-ended be(com)ing of life forms. In the same regard, I shall employ the term ‘death’ in its much more widely used sense: the cessation of biological processes that sustain particular beings. This will be contrasted against the term ‘extinction’, which, as outlined earlier, applies Heidegger’s (2010) idea of death — the loss of the open-ended possibilities of being — beyond human Dasein to life forms.

Having set out a framework for understanding extinction in ontological terms, we can now ask whether IR, in its current form, is capable of confronting a global extinction crisis. Doing so, as I have argued earlier, is necessary if IR is to confront perhaps the most profound challenge to the survival of life on Earth.
A ‘theory of survival’: Can IR confront a global extinction crisis?

Realists and their critics alike have long argued that IR is a ‘theory of survival’ (Wight, 1960: 48; see also Odysseos, 2002), that is, that survival constitutes its most fundamental concept. I want to argue that the discipline may be so deeply invested in the concept of survival, and so dependent on its possibility, that it is incapable of confronting its own boundary condition: extinction. Indeed, no existing framework within IR has directly theorized extinction, and none of the existing treatments of extinction within this field can account for the (weak) ontological nature of the phenomenon. Instead, in the rare cases where the actual term ‘extinction’ is invoked in IR theory, it is treated in purely ontic terms as a metaphor for the dissolution of states (see Morgenthau, 2005; Wight, 1960). In these contexts, it refers to the death (or, in Heideggerian terms, ‘perishing’) of particular states; it does not suggest that the possibility of ‘stateness’ might be eliminated from the planet. Similarly, despite their name, discourses of ‘ontological security’ (see Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2007) focus exclusively on the ontic, that is, the maintenance of particular institutions and collective identities in the face of threat. These approaches focus on the death or dissolution of the subjects of IR, but not threats to their continuation as a mode of being or becoming.

The closest approximations to an ontological account of extinction emerged in the Cold War era, a period when the possibility of nuclear war made the concept of ‘planetary crisis’ (Masco, 2010) central to IR discourses. Perhaps the most iconic of these was the idea of ‘nuclear winter’ popularized by Carl Sagan and his colleagues (1983). This model predicted that a full-scale nuclear war would not only destroy life on a massive scale, but also undermine the conditions for its regeneration and flourishing. Specifically, it suggested that a post-nuclear world would be dominated by conditions of cold, dark and extreme radioactivity that would wipe out many species. Life for remaining humans would be precarious in the absence of the networks that provide access to global supplies of food, medicine and other basic needs. Meanwhile, altered climatic conditions would give free rein to viral epidemics, along with a global-scale deluge of deadly toxins and ultraviolet flux. As a result of these and other effects, Sagan suggests, nuclear winter could reduce human populations at least to prehistoric levels, creating a ‘real possibility’ (Sagan, 1983) of human extinction. However, although the idea of ‘nuclear winter’ acknowledges the potential of nuclear warfare to destroy other life forms, it is primarily concerned with the possibility of human survival. John Somerville’s (2012 [1983]) concept of ‘omnicide’ is much wider in scope: it acknowledges the possibility that nuclear warfare could threaten the survival of all modes of life on Earth. Importantly, Somerville suggests that this kind of threat might issue not only from nuclear warfare, but also from ecological collapse brought about by human activity. In this regard, it presages discourses of global-scale, multidimensional threat — such as conceptions of existential risk — concerned with survival as the sustenance of biological life processes.

Both of these concepts address elements of the global extinction crisis, but neither captures its (weak) ontological significance. The concept of nuclear winter is focused on the degradation of conditions that sustain biological life, but it does not account for
the possibility of the total and irreversible destruction of life forms. Furthermore, it is asymptotic, in that it imagines a planet on which the populations of many currently existing life forms have been severely reduced. However, it does not provide conceptual resources for thinking a scenario in which these life forms are completely eliminated, or what, precisely, would be at stake in such a scenario. Indeed, it presents a narrative of future human life that is deeply endangered and impoverished, yet nonetheless existent in a recognizable form. As such, it does not broach the ontological — or ethical — significance of extinction as such, but rather focuses on large-scale death. In contrast, the concept of omnicide gestures towards the total elimination of life, which it treats as a non sequitur. It does not give an account of what would be lost in such a scenario other than the organisms and processes that sustain life. As such, it is based on a concept of large-scale death — that is, the perishing of undifferentiated organisms — rather than extinction, which marks the loss of distinct life forms.

Other concepts within international thought have focused more clearly on the ethical implications of the irreversible elimination of collective ways of life. In particular, the concept of genocide was designed to respond to the irreversible and total destruction of peoples through systematic killing, the prevention of reproduction and the prevention of cultural transmission. This concept seems to address the central ontological and ethical stakes of extinction: what is lost when an entire life form is irreversibly extinguished. However, it cannot be applied to a global, multi-species extinction event, for several reasons. First, it refers only to subgroups of one species (homo sapiens), not to the elimination of the entire species, let alone the destruction of most or even all life forms. It is crucial to emphasize that this argument does not detract from the enormity of genocide; rather, it signals the ontological distinctiveness of genocide in relation to extinction and mass extinction. Moreover, the crime of genocide is based on the intent to destroy an entire people. In contrast, with the exception of policies of direct extirpation of organisms deemed to be ‘invasive’ species, the processes of extinction discussed earlier are primarily unintentional effects of multiple forms of human activity. The issue of intentionality does not, in itself, prevent a concept like genocide from providing extinction and mass extinction with a legal grounding that reflects their ontological and ethical significance. Proponents of a proposed law of ‘ecocide’ (see Higgins, 2010) aim to extend the international laws for the prevention and punishment of genocide to include ecological damage producing similar results. They point out that Raphael Lemkin’s original definition of genocide included forms of destruction other than killing (Gauger et al., 2012) and victims other than humans. This more expansive concept of genocide seems to capture many of the elements of extinction, including irreversibility, totality and the all-encompassing nature of the destruction at hand. Nonetheless, since it is designed to fit within the constraints of the existing international legal system, the proposed law of ecocide would still only apply to specific instances of destruction (for instance, oil spills) in which individual culprits could be identified and prosecutable harms enumerated. As such, it cannot address the massive spatio-temporal scales and complex, distributed causality of a global extinction crisis. It is also important to note that discourses of ecocide refer to the extinction of particular species and harms to specific human communities as a possible outcome of criminal actions; they do not theorize or explore the ethical dimensions of mass extinction, or of the total extinction of humans.
Contemporary thinking about extinction within international discourses has moved away from both Cold War-era preoccupations with sudden, catastrophic events and the ethics of elimination towards the biopolitical management of life processes. This is exemplified by the over 150 conventions governing the management of biodiversity, the most important and seminal of which is the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992). It is remarkable that although this treaty was designed to coordinate international efforts to stem the loss of species and ecosystems, the term ‘extinction’ does not appear once in its original text. I want to argue that this omission is indicative of a broader discourse that treats extinction as a problem of biopolitical management. Indeed, other major treaties — such as the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the World Heritage Convention — contain a range of instruments for managing species and biodiversity, such as restrictions on trade and targets for population numbers. They also encourage strategies aimed at sustaining the life processes of particular species, including: ‘species survival plans’; forced breeding programmes; conservation projects; the creation of seed and gene banks; and even ‘de-extinction’ projects aimed at ‘bringing back’ extinct species by bio-engineering remnants of DNA (see, for instance, Haraway, 2008; Van Dooren, 2014; Van Dooren and Rose, 2014). Each of these projects is oriented towards sustaining the existence of particular species by controlling the life and death processes through which its continuity is achieved. In other words, these approaches assume that extinction can be allayed by managing the biological processes of life and death in an additive (species-by-species) way.

The same framing of extinction as a problem of biopolitical management has begun to permeate security discourses. For instance, the accelerating extinction of species is expected to frustrate the goals of achieving food security, eradicating poverty and attaining universal health (Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) — 2010) — all of which are key tenets of the United Nations’ (UN’s) Sustainable Development Goals. From this perspective, the extinction of nonhuman species is a threat to the continuation of particular patterns of human survival. Recently, the possibility of human extinction has also entered security discourses, where it is treated as a ‘hyperbole of insecurity’ (Aradau and Munster, 2011: 3), that is, it is framed as an amplification or extreme case of security threats such as war or terrorism, and thus assumed to be subject to governance interventions. This assumption is reflected especially clearly in recent discourses of the ‘catastrophic’. In these discourses, the lack of an explicit theory of extinction means that the term is free to be deployed as a blanket definition for opaque, worst-case scenarios. For instance, Claudia Aradau and Rens Munster (2011: 5) examine a US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) training document that locates events on a continuum that ranges from emergency to disaster to catastrophe and finally to extinction. A close look at this document (Bissell, no date) shows that extinction is defined simply as the ‘loss of all human life’ and it is assumed that ‘no effective response is available’. This framing of extinction simultaneously suggests that it can (only) be approached as an issue of security, and that, ultimately, no security strategy can be effective in the face of it. Such reasoning underpins a new security dispositif, in which states and other security actors mobilize ‘anticipatory’ forms of discipline on the basis of vague imperatives to ‘prepare for the worst’ — while ceding the ability to respond it. Indeed, according to Brad Evans and Julian Reid (2014), states and corporations are increasingly mobilizing fear of a ‘sixth mass extinction’ in order to underwrite neoliberal projects of ‘resilience’. Becoming
‘resilient’, they claim, forces human communities to ensure their own survival in a context of ever-decreasing security. Meanwhile, having framed catastrophe as inevitable, states and other security actors contribute to insecurity by reneging on their responsibilities to minimize it.

Within these discourses, extinction and mass extinction are treated as purely ontic problems — specifically, as threats to survival, understood as a matter of life and death. However, according to the theoretical framework set out earlier, this type of reasoning cannot help us to address (mass) extinction, which encompasses and negates both life and death processes (Rose, 2011). By conflating (mass) extinction with large-scale death, these approaches commit a category error with extremely high stakes, namely, they suggest that humans can control (mass) extinction through the selective, technological management of reproduction. These strategies fail to identify or respond to the (weak) ontological nature of extinction, that is, to the destruction of and their trajectories of be(com)ing. In short, strategies designed to manage the ontic processes of life and death cannot address the ontological forces of be(com)ing and negation.

This brief analysis shows that throughout its history and across its various dimensions — international theory, norms, law and security studies — IR has flirted with the concept of extinction but has not produced a robust framework for addressing it. In several cases, it has yielded misleading treatments of extinction that mistake its fundamental (weak) ontological character for an ontic problem of life and death. I shall now argue that this is largely because IR is so invested in human survival that it renders the assumption of its possibility unquestionable — and therefore renders extinction unthinkable. I shall now argue that if IR is to respond to the unfolding global extinction crisis, it needs to overcome the barriers it erects against thinking extinction.

Making extinction ‘thinkable’ in IR

‘How can we even contemplate “a world without us”?’, asks the science journalist Alan Weisman (2008: 224) in his eponymous best-selling book. According to Weisman, human responsiveness to extinction is ‘undermined by our survival instincts, honed over eons to help us deny, defy or ignore catastrophic portents lest they paralyze us with fear’ (Weisman, 2008: 3; see also Marshall, 2014). From this perspective, extinction is literally unthinkable. However, I want to argue that it is not (only) evolutionary ‘hard-wiring’ that renders extinction a blind spot in IR discourses; it is also the result of the unquestioned assumption that human survival is possible. This assumption is manifested in a strong form of anthropocentrism that precludes consideration of nonhuman and inhuman beings, and that renders human extinction a taboo subject. I shall now explore how this form of anthropocentrism makes extinction ‘unthinkable’, and introduce frameworks that can enable thought beyond the horizon of (human) survival.

As I have argued elsewhere (Mitchell, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), IR is dominated by a profound anthropocentrism that renders Western secular images of humanity the focal point of cosmology, the sole source of agency and the referent of all ethical action. This framework presupposes the existence of a unified ‘humanity’, even as it frames this subject as fundamentally contingent and in need of securing. Recent posthumanist contributions to IR
argue that this framework ignores the importance of nonhumans — for instance, other animals, ecosystems, materials, machines and networks — in co-constituting and transforming the world, and in making ethical demands (see, for instance, Burke, 2011, 2013; Coward, 2009; Cudworth and Hobden, 2011). These approaches go some way in explaining why extinction has not been theorized in IR: as a result of the presumption of human existence and the predominance of nonhuman animals as icons of extinction (Yusoff, 2011), extinction is framed as a problem for ‘other species’. In a discipline for which ‘humanity’ and humans are considered the only subjects of ethics, security and agency, extinction is deemed only marginally relevant and is relegated to the biological sciences. This line of critique helps to explain why certain beings — ‘nonhumans’ — are deemed irrelevant in relation to the human.

In order to confront extinction, however, it is also necessary for IR to engage with the inhuman: the modes of being that do not depend on, and may not admit of, any relation to humans or ‘the human’ (Clark, 2011; Yusoff, 2013). In this context, the term ‘inhuman’ refers to the flux of forces, forms of life and patterns of matter whose existence and causal powers are not derived from, cannot be attributed to and do not require human existence. Although the inhuman coexists along with humans and other living beings, it also refers to temporalities before and after the existence of humans. Crucially, the term ‘inhuman’ refers not to particular, extant beings (as in the case of nonhumans), but rather to forces and conditions that bear no trace of human (and perhaps other) forms of subjectivity. Only by engaging with the inhuman, I shall now argue, is it possible to confront the possibilities of extinction.

To understand why, it is useful to return to Weisman’s question and to examine his fable more closely. The World Without Us presents a portrait of the Earth in which all humans have been eliminated suddenly and totally, perhaps by a virus to which only homo sapiens is vulnerable. Inhabiting this imaginary, Weisman describes a planet in which: cities are quickly devoured by microbes, insects and plant life; metropolises are deluged when human infrastructural maintenance ceases; and the toxic traces of petroleum and plastic are among the most visible legacies of human civilization. At first glance, Weisman’s narrative appears to be a direct and unflinching engagement with the demise of homo sapiens. However, a closer reading shows that there is still very much an ‘us’ — that is, a subjective ‘humanity’ — present in this post(-human)-extinction world. It is this ‘us’ that directs the author’s gaze, which is concerned with the fate of homes, cities and artistic legacies, and that wonders whether the Earth will ‘miss us’ once ‘we’ have gone extinct. Weisman’s tale, therefore, exemplifies an asymptotic engagement with the concept of extinction akin to that found in discourses of ‘nuclear winter’. It claims to represent human extinction, but ultimately recuperates the ‘human’ subject by viewing the world through the lens of its imagined remnants, traces and vestigial survivors. Ironically, Weisman cannot (or will not) contemplate a world without (an) ‘us’. This returns us to his question: is such a world thinkable in practical terms, that is, can existent beings think their own non-existence?

In one of his most challenging writings, Jean-Francois Lyotard meditates on the limits of survival in a solar system whose star is about half-way through its expected ‘lifetime’ of 9 billion years. ‘After the sun’s death’, Lyotard (2000: 130–131) states:
there won’t be a thought to know that its death took place … the solar explosion won’t leave behind it a devastated human world, dehumanized, but with none the less at least a single survivor, someone to tell the story of what’s left … in what remains after the solar explosion, there won’t be any humanness … there won’t be intelligent, sensitive, sentient earthlings to bear witness to it, since they and their earthly horizon will have been consumed.

In contrast to the narratives discussed earlier, this image of a post-solar universe bears few traces of recognizably human subjects. Indeed, Lyotard contends that such a subjectivity might only survive if humans manage to upload their distinct mode of consciousness into a non-corporeal format. Ray Brassier (2007) is even less optimistic. He points out that roughly one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will destroy matter itself. When this happens, he claims:

Every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness. … All free matter, whether on planetary surfaces or in interstellar space, will have decayed, eradicating any remnants of life based in protons and chemistry, and erasing every vestige of sentience — irrespective of its physical basis. (Brassier, 2007: 227–228)

Both of these authors depict futures in which human and other forms of subjectivity are not dominant, present or even possible, that is, a cosmos beyond total extinction.

Simply imagining such a cosmos requires relinquishing a cherished assumption of Enlightenment (especially post-Kantian) thought, what Quentin Meillassoux (2009) calls ‘correlationism’. This principle holds that ‘what exists exists only as a correlate of our own existence’ (Meillassoux, 2009: L163) — in other words, that ‘there is a world only insofar as a consciousness transcends itself towards it’. As Brassier (2007: 60) helpfully remarks, it is not only ‘thinking’ or conscious beings whose presence is deemed necessary, but rather beings capable of perception, intuition, affect or sensation (Brassier, 2007: 51). Meillassoux (2009: L1009) contends that correlationism produces a misleading form of ‘species solipsism’: the belief that we are ensconced in a ‘community [that] only has dealings with itself, and with the world with which it is contemporaneous’. This image epitomizes the anthropocentric basis of IR, which defines its own scope, and that of ethico-political relevance, as identical with a particular notion of ‘humanity’ (see Mitchell, 2014a, 2015).

For correlationists, the world is always given to ‘us’; as such, the extinction of humans is made unthinkable in practical terms. Meillassoux undercuts this assumption by pointing to a familiar, yet profoundly defamiliarizing, source of evidence, what he calls the ‘arche-fossil’, or the artefact of ‘ancestral’ time. Ancestrality hoves into view when scientists discuss the age of the universe, the date of the accretion of the earth, the appearance and subsidence of pre-human species, or the emergence of humanity. In each of these cases, they are describing objects that are ‘anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life … that is, anterior to every form of human relation to the world’ (Meillassoux, 2009: L219. Emphasis in original). Contemplating the arche-fossil and its ancestrality make it possible to think the conditions of the inhuman discussed earlier: in short, they force humans to confront being without subjectivity. Crucially, Meillassoux contends that the kind of thinking made possible by the arche-fossil is not confined to the anterior; the temporal discrepancy (or ‘dia-chronicity’) it reflects also applies to events and forms
of being posterior to the existence of humans (Meillassoux, 2009: L2212). In fact, Ray Brassier (2007: 229. Emphasis in original) argues that posteriority poses a more profound challenge to correlationism:

the posteriority of extinction indexes a physical annihilation which no amount of chronological tinkering can transform into a correlate ‘for us’, because no matter how proximal or distal the position allocated to it in space-time, it has already cancelled the sufficiency of the correlation.

Thinking in these terms makes it possible to grasp everything — including life on Earth — as profoundly contingent. Indeed, Meillassoux argues that the only necessary ontological condition is total contingency. Even phenomena that are understood to be necessary, such as the laws of physics, actually embody what he calls ‘facticity’. For Meillassoux, ‘facticity’ not only designates certain beings as worldly (as opposed to transcendent), but also suggests that their worldliness renders them fundamentally changeable. In fact, Meillassoux’s notion of facticity, and his insistence in universal contingency, rules out the possibility of a transcendent realm that could ground fundamental universals. For example, there may be every (empirical) reason to believe that a physical law or a scientific precept is true, but there are no, and can be no, transcendent bases for grounding that belief. According to Meillassoux (2009: L1060–1067):

everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this is not by virtue of the absence of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing.

One might argue that while philosophically interesting, such insights do not make much difference in the context of a practical discipline such as IR. After all, even if the laws of physics are fundamentally contingent, this does not render them useless; it is still possible to erect buildings and launch rockets on the basis of the insights they provide.5 The difference in the case of extinction is that while the reversal of the laws of physics is possible but infinitesimally probable, it is much more probable that a global extinction event is already under way. Architects and rocket scientists would be deeply concerned with the reversal of the laws of physics if there were evidence that it were happening, and that the basic principles of their trades could no longer be taken for granted. Given the gamut of threats currently challenging the survival of existing life forms (see earlier), I am arguing that this is precisely the challenge that evidence of a global (mass) extinction threat is already raising for IR.

Meillassoux’s arguments regarding absolute contingency shed additional light on the nature of extinction and its (weak) ontological relevance. Crucially, Meillassoux distinguishes between facticity (or the fundamental contingency of being) and ‘precariousness’. Whereas the former term refers to the idea that every entity might not exist and may be other than it is without reason, the latter refers to the material contingency of objects, that is, their tendency to perish, disintegrate or lose integrity. In the terminology discussed earlier, facticity is an ontological concept, while precariousness is an ontic one, that is, facticity refers to the possibility that all life forms might go extinct, while precariousness refers to the certainty that all organisms will die. Earlier, I argued that IR
in its current form can think about survival only against the horizon of precariousness, or the mortality and mutability of extant beings. The concept of facticity makes it possible to think the non-being of extant forms of life, and the contingency of being. As such, it undercuts one of the most fundamental, if subtle, *metaphysical* assumptions of IR: that the existence of familiar life forms — primarily the ‘human’ — can be taken for granted, even if large numbers of lives or species are deeply endangered. It is this assumption that underpins responses to extinction that seek to manage life and death strategies rather than acknowledging the fundamental contingency of being.

Acknowledging this condition makes it possible to think extinction — if not in positive terms, then in negative terms. By engaging with facticity, Meillassoux contends, humans are able to grasp the ‘possibility’ of that which is wholly other to the world yet is immanent to it, that is, they cannot apprehend the *actuality* of this alterity, but they cannot establish its *impossibility*, meaning that ‘nothing can be said to be absolutely impossible, not even the unthinkable’ (Meillassoux, 2009: L818). This suggests that even if humans cannot describe or intuit what a ‘world without us’ would look like, it is possible to imagine its existence, and, as such, to think beyond the limits of (human) survival. According to this line of argument, extinction is practically thinkable; even if it cannot be fully apprehended, it cannot be easily bracketed off as something that is beyond the capabilities of human thought.

However, I want to argue that the problem is not only one of cognitive capability: extinction is also made ‘unthinkable’ in IR as a result of normative taboos. These taboos secure the existing ontological and ethical bases of IR — the survival of ‘humanity’ — by prohibiting thinking about (human) extinction, even as it is increasingly recognized as a real possibility. Indeed, according to Claire Colebrook (2014a: 186):

> now that life appears to be in danger of disappearance, diminution or mutation beyond recognition, living humans indulge both in greater and greater insistence on the sanctity of life, and seem incapable of directly confronting the intensifying threats that menace the present.

What Colebrook presents as a paradox, in fact, seems rational in the context of IR: the sanctity and centrality of human life as the basis of all being, action and ethics creates strong prohibitions against thinking its negation. As Colebrook (2014a: 142) puts it: ‘humanity has been fabricated as the proper ground of all life — so much so that threats to all life on Earth are being dealt with today by focusing on how man may adapt, mitigate and survive’ (Colebrook, 2014a: 142). Security discourses, in particular, convert questions of whether humans (or other life forms) can continue to exist into questions of who gets to live and die, and how. In order to function as mobilizing and governing logics, they must portray security as *possible*, but not guaranteed. As a result, even though human *life* is treated as contingent, ‘humanity’ as a life form is taken for granted, both as a practical possibility and as an unquestioned good.

For Colebrook, this produces a serious failure of thought: it leaves unquestioned the insistence on dominant modes of existence. In this context, survival is a powerful dogma, to the extent that simply *questioning* prevailing conceptions of survival is interpreted as an attempt to undermine survival as *such*. As a result of the unwillingness to question survival, political action will continue to be channelled towards sustaining the ‘survival
mechanisms that have brought the human species and its milieu to the brink of destruction’ (Colebrook, 2014a: 13). In other words, the unwillingness to question the dominant concept of survival as the continuation of life-as-it-is condemns humans and other life forms to cling tenuously to it. For Colebrook, only questioning the dogma of survival can enable us to critique this condition, and possibly (although not necessarily) to transcend it.

In the context of IR and other anthropocentric forms of thought, this is a radical premise. Critics of this approach may object that Colebrook’s perspective is not only anti-humanist, but also anti-human, that is, that its manner of contemplating extinction amounts to a misanthropic desire for it. This is far too simplistic a reading. For Colebrook, the point of thinking about the possibilities of extinction — that is, not only its probability, but also the new modes of being that might emerge from it — is to challenge dogmatic assumptions about the value of particular forms of life. She suggests that the ‘scandal’ of anthropocentric thought is:

not that humans have placed their own survival as more valuable than other lives, but that at the heart of moral philosophy is an assumption that nothing is more valuable or definitive of value than human life’s capacity to maintain and define itself. (Colebrook, 2014a: 203)

In other words, such frameworks elide human existence with the attempt to secure currently existing forms of life, however bare they might become. This, in turn, precludes critical engagement with ‘what the actual death of man might enable, whether “we” ought to live on, and just what or who this saved “we” approaching finality might be’ (Colebrook, 2014a: 13). This argument is post-humanist: it questions the foundations of a belief system in which humans are the sole centre and purpose of being. However, it need not be anti-human: it is possible to reject a particular, normative account of ‘humanity’ while maintaining a benevolent attitude towards humans. Moreover, questioning the survival of dominant conceptions of ‘humanity’ does not equate to suggesting that human life per se — that is, in all of its possible forms and permutations — has no value. Instead, it challenges the belief that there is only one valuable mode of human survival. As I shall argue shortly, this argument may open up new possibilities of survival, of being human — and of being-otherwise. This helps to undercut one of the most powerful taboos against confronting extinction: that it amounts to an extinction-wish, and that it is therefore necessary to preclude serious thought and discussion about it.

This discussion has suggested that extinction is not ‘unthinkable’ in itself. It is possible at least to glimpse the inhuman, and the facticity of subjective existence. Moreover, by breaking taboos around the discussion of extinction, it is possible to critique the core assumptions and foundations of IR. With all of this in mind, what would IR look like if it took extinction seriously? Would it survive, and, if so, in what forms?

Is IR going extinct?

So far, I have argued that IR does not engage rigorously with extinction either as a core concept or as a boundary condition; indeed, it renders extinction unthinkable in order to secure its foundational assumptions. I have also argued that it is possible to think extinction in this context by challenging anthropocentric norms and engaging with the
inhuman. Doing so would involve transforming IR profoundly, not only in terms of its subject matter, but also with regards to its most basic ontological and metaphysical assumptions. Is such a turn desirable? Earlier, I made this argument from the perspective of necessity: IR must engage seriously with extinction if it is to respond to evidence of a global extinction crisis and the possibility of existential threats, that is, IR must change beyond recognition if it is to avoid going extinct. However, what, if any, are the positive possibilities of such a turn?

In order to explore these questions, it is important to outline the nature and scope of the changes that IR would need to undergo in order to respond to the challenges raised by (mass) extinction. The argument so far suggests several profound transformations.

First, it is crucial that IR develops a robust conceptual basis for engaging with (mass) extinction as one of its central concepts and as the fundamental boundary condition of survival. This, in turn, requires moving beyond anthropocentric conceptions of IR to acknowledge the nonhuman and the inhuman. For instance, confronting ancestrality and the potential of a future without subjectivity requires extending the temporal horizons of IR backwards and forwards beyond the scope of human history. Moreover, taking contingency (or Meillassoux’s ‘facticity’) seriously would require a shift in register from an ontic concern with managing and sustaining existing life and death processes to a (weak) ontological concern with the open-ended be(com)ing of life forms. This, in turn, would demand the understanding that survival — as the perpetuation of currently existing life processes — may not be a practicable possibility of instrumental human action in the long term.

Perhaps most profoundly, taking extinction seriously would involve relinquishing the fetishism of survival as it relates to dominant conceptions of the human rather than simply adapting these conceptions to new sources and registers of threat. In other words, it would be necessary to dispense with the imperative to ensure at all costs the survival of currently existing norms and modes of human life. However, why should emancipation from this imperative be desirable? Simply put, the imperative to preserve dominant, existing modes of human life monopolizes human energy, dominates frameworks of value and imposes stasis on extant life forms. This imperative imposes a kind of death (in the Heideggerian sense) on life forms: it prevents them from unfolding into their indeterminate, virtual possibilities, entrapping them in the mode of rigid metaphysical categories. The severing of possibilities of becoming can already be intuited within the biopolitical discourses of extinction discussed earlier. These discourses simultaneously frame the survival of ‘humanity-as-it-is’ as the dominant principle of being and highest value, while presenting it as imminently and irreversibly threatened (see Evans and Reid, 2014). Within this stark opposition, the political possibilities of becoming are precluded by the imperative to survive ‘as we are’ at all costs.

What if, instead, it were possible to refuse the demand to survive — without embracing an extinction-wish or desiring the elimination of any species? In the context of IR, this would entail resisting the powerful discourses of biopolitical discipline, catastrophism, resilience and mitigation discussed earlier and becoming open to the possibilities of extinction, in two senses: in the sense that extinction may occur; and in the sense of the new modes of ethico-political action and forms of life it might enable. Being open to the possibility of extinction does not involve relinquishing all claims to continued existence or the desire to pursue them. Instead, by removing the imperative to secure the indefinite
survival of dominant forms of life at all costs, it might free these energies to develop modes of being-otherwise. As Colebrook (2014a: 58) puts it:

As long as we calculate the future as one of sustaining, maintaining, adapting and rendering ourselves viable … there would be no future for us other than an eventual, barely lived petering out. If, however, we entertained the erasure of the human … then there might be a future. (Colebrook, 2014a: 58)

What visions, logics and inputs might IR contribute to this new future, and how might it be transformed as a result?

**Cosmopolitics and the possibilities of extinction**

Extinction is not only about endings; it can also be understood as a force that engenders ethico-political creativity in and with the conditions of finitude (Mitchell, 2016). Viewing (mass) extinction in this way consists of ‘a confrontation with perishing, finitude, and fragility but one that fills us with at least as much wonder as dread, more political energy than resignation, and takes seriously that apocalypses are not ends but irreversible transitions’ (Grove, 2015). This, in turn, involves reframing nihilism not as an apolitical collapse into apathy and submission to visions of the inevitable, but rather as a ‘speculative opportunity’ that opens up new futures (Brassier, 2007: xi). In other words, rather than promoting (only) a ‘will to nothingness’, let alone a malevolent extinction-wish, engaging with the possibilities of non-being can make it possible to embrace the indeterminacy of the universe and its creative forces. I shall now argue that it demands and enables a politics attuned to the biological, geological and cosmological forces of the universe: a cosmopolitics.

According to Isabelle Stengers (2005), ‘cosmopolitics’ is politics rooted in the acknowledgement of the multiple, diverse and constantly transforming beings that constitute the cosmos. It hinges on the belief that all beings make interventions that shape, disrupt and transform political processes. Importantly, participation in these processes does not require representation in terms of human interests or even the ability to act or speak in a human-oriented sense. Indeed, Stengers (2005: 996) asserts that ‘the political arena is peopled with shadows of that which does not have, cannot have or does not want to have a political voice’. A range of beings — whether they are considered human and nonhuman, living and non-living, organic and inorganic — can intervene in politics by ‘forcing thought’ through their effects, properties, presence or absence. For instance, water can make its force felt politically by destroying human habitations and ecosystems in the form of floods, by withdrawing and creating droughts, or by sustaining and nurturing multiple life forms. For Stengers, these issues are not made political by humans: to the extent that they have an effect in the world, they are always-already political. According to Stengers, the interventions of multiple beings help to slow down processes of universalization central to traditional modes of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, the presence of other beings with conflicting interests and needs makes universalization, and political decision-making, ‘as difficult as possible’ (Stengers, 2005: 1003). Cosmopolitics is conflictual and agonistic: the insurgence of awkward subjects and the obstructions, disruptions and disjunctures they create can nurture pluralism and generate creative politics.
Crucially, cosmopolitics is not simply an intensification or variant of cosmopolitanism. Whereas cosmopolitanism stresses the suffix -politan, cosmopolitics shifts emphasis to the prefix cosmo-, that is, it takes the cosmos, rather than human communities, as the basis and locus of political action. Cosmopolitanism, as Colebrook contends, is based on the extrapolation and expansion of a polity that, while it may be expanded to include other beings, is centrifugal to the figure of humanity. In other words, the cosmos of cosmopolitanism ‘is always an extension of the composed polity, an abstraction or idealization of man englobed in his world of human others’ (Colebrook, 2014a: 110). Even the most radical contemporary reframings of cosmopolitanism, in contrast, involve stretching the scope of the human-dominated polity to include all humans and (certain) non-humans (see Linklater, 2011). Anthony Burke (2013, 2015) has attempted to radically rethink cosmopolitanism in terms of the intermeshing of complex processes, material conditions and (human and nonhuman) actors across planetary space-time. However, I want to argue that this project is better understood in the context of cosmopolitics, insofar as it seeks to render the cosmos the ontological basis of politics.

I want to argue that a modified form of cosmopolitics — one attuned to the inhuman — is demanded by, and can ground meaningful responses to, (mass) extinction. Specifically, Stengers’s cosmopolitics acknowledges the role of the weak, marginalized and ‘shadowy’ subjects; it focuses largely on presence, that is, on the positive beings that interrupt human activities. In order to respond to mass extinction, cosmopolitics must place more focus on absence, negation and non-being. Colebrook hints at this in her call to ‘destroy cosmopolitanism for the sake of the cosmos’ (Colebrook, 2014a: 96). She claims that arguing that:

if the crises of the twenty-first century were to prompt us to think at all it may be in a cosmic and inhuman mode, asking … what the elements of this earth are, what force they bear, how we are composed in relation to those forces. (Colebrook, 2014a: 114)

If we consider (mass) extinction as one of these forces, a different kind of cosmopolitics emerges — one that responds to extinction and considerably adds to the conceptual mass of IR. This mode of cosmopolitics makes it possible to generate new forms of solidarity based not on the fear of collective annihilation, but rather on a sense of shared vulnerability that is the condition of earthly coexistence. For Rosi Braidotti (2013), such solidarities emerge from the defamiliarization of dominant norms of ‘humanity’, which, she argues, is best achieved by thinking as if ‘humanity’ were already extinct. This, she contends, compels humans to ‘think critically about who we are and what we are actually in the process of becoming’ (Braidotti, 2013: 49–50). From this perspective, attention to the inhuman, and to the possible extinction of humans, can produce an ‘enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or “earth” others’ (Braidotti, 2013: 49–50). The same processes of defamiliarization, Colebrook (2014a: 58) suggests, would make possible a radical new form of feminism that, in embracing ‘a thought of life beyond the human’, would place neither man nor woman at its centre (Colebrook, 2014b: 16). By unsettling the foundations of ‘humanity’ itself, she contends, thinking the inhuman makes it possible to transcend boundaries such as gender and race that essentialize characteristics as ‘essentially’ human. This would have profound importance for feminist, queer and decolonial international politics: it would undercut the metaphysical foundations of sources of exclusion and oppression against which they
struggle. In short, contemplating the extinction of ‘the human’ makes it possible to imagine alternative, future life forms that bear resemblances to, but are not restricted by, existing norms of ‘humanity’.

Moreover, a cosmopolitics attuned to the inhuman could profoundly transform global ethics by grounding it not in a politics of ressentiment, but rather one of gratitude. The geographer Nigel Clark (2011) argues that humans should embrace the finite, deeply contingent and potentially meaningless (in a transcendent, metaphysical sense) existence furnished by an indifferent Earth. Specifically, he claims that human existence is contingent upon conditions created by previous (largely extinct) life forms and by inhuman forces, both contemporary and temporally distant. From this perspective, existence is a gift given to humans (among others) but it is not given-for-us in the correlationist sense. Instead, humans are indebted to a chain of interlocking forces that are ultimately indifferent to their existence. Clark argues that humans should embrace this gift with the knowledge that it can, and eventually will, be withdrawn. This means accepting and honouring it without treating it as an entitlement or devaluing it on account of its finitude. His account contrasts sharply with the discourses of catastrophe, resilience and biopolitics discussed earlier, which devalue any mode of life that cannot be indefinitely sustained through human intervention. Clark finds an ethico-political alternative to these logics in an ethos of gratitude and reciprocation. For Clark, the latter is epitomized by the actions of the government of Kiribati — the small island state perhaps most imminently threatened by rising sea levels — in creating one of the world’s largest marine parks in 2006 (the Phoenix Islands Protected Area). In so doing, Clark contends, this community expressed unconditional gratitude for the gift of existence rather than resentment of its endangerment. Moreover, by seeking to protect and preserve the watery medium that threatens to destroy it, Kiribatians embodied a mode of meaningful response to disaster that was not constrained to sustaining survival-as-we-know-it.

Moreover, a cosmopolitics attuned to extinction and to the inhuman would foster a new mode of future-oriented politics based not on the continuity of the present, but rather on the creative possibilities of discontinuity and unpredictable difference. For Evans and Reid (2014: 164), biopolitical responses to extinction reflect a ‘cult of mourning’ for the coming death of existing species life that ‘manages to turn the wondrous phenomenon of the emergence of new forms of life … into a problematic of security and threat’. Indeed, in popular literature on extinction, there is a marked tone of mourning and fear about what might ‘replace’ humans as Earth’s dominant species, and the readers’ focus is trained on monstrous figures such as robots, microbes or giant rats (see Zalasiewicz, 2008). In contrast, cosmopolitics attuned to extinction and the inhuman would be open to the new forms of being that might emerge from, or even in place of, humans. For instance, it might involve overcoming fear and revulsion of the hybrid or mutant creatures that are emerging, at least in part from human scientific interventions, treating them with love and care instead of abjection (see Haraway, 2011; Latour, 2012). Crucially, it would also involve embracing the defamiliarized modalities of currently existing humanity discussed earlier. This includes beings so transformed through technological and evolutionary change as to be almost unrecognizable to ‘us’ (currently existing humans), and the ‘defamiliarized’ beings no longer essentialized in terms of race, sex or gender. The cosmopolitics I am outlining here would embrace these beings-to-come instead of fearing and resenting them. This amounts to a kind of futural gratitude that mirrors the Kiribatian marine park — an ethics of comportment towards the
unknowable other that might displace ‘us’. However, how can currently existing humans adopt such an ethics? Emmanuel Levinas (1998: 50) terms this mode of ethics ‘being-for-beyond-my-death’, that is, being ‘for a time that would be without me … in order to be for that which is after me’. Although Levinas is referring to human individuals and their comportment towards future generations of humans, this principle can be translated across species boundaries and to a collective register. It profoundly shifts the emphasis of human action — instead of attempting to secure existing conditions, it encourages ‘action for a world to come’, and responsiveness to the ethical demands of the (remote, unknowable) Other (Levinas, 1998: 51). Clark, writing in a Levinasian vein, agrees that embracing future life forms is not passive. Instead, it requires the ability to see ‘the intolerability of the world as it is presently imagined and demands the seemingly impossible; the creation of a new one’ (Clark, 2011: 195).

Crucially, this ethos is not a replacement for security or the pursuit of indefinite survival, but rather a qualitatively different kind of politics. It cannot guarantee the survival of humanity-as-it-is — the goal to which all existing strategies and responses to extinction are oriented. It entails an ‘eschatology without hope for oneself’ (Levinas, 1998: 51): welcoming new worlds makes, and demands, no promises. While this ethos engenders cautious hope for undetermined futures, it cannot be made conditional on the survival of existing forms of life. Instead, it must be pursued ‘for the hell of it and for love of the world’ (Braidotti, 2010: 17). This shifts the logic of responsiveness to extinction from one of mastery and control to one of gratitude and hopeful, creative experimentation. As Clark (2011: 217, paraphrasing Allan Stoekl) puts it:

we might have a better chance of prising the planet out of its downward ecological spiral accidentally, not as the goal of a grand, visionary project but as the unintended consequence of more joyous and generous living right here and now.

In other words, adopting an attitude of hospitality and generosity towards other beings might help to open up a future of long-term flourishing for humans and other beings. However, as Clark argues, this kind of action needs to have the character of Derridean hospitality, that is, it needs to be undertaken without conditionality, or, in this case, the demand for security. Adopting this ethico-political orientation does not involve capitulation to extinction, and even less an extinction-wish. Instead, it widens the range of human responsiveness far beyond the spectrum of pre-emptive trauma, loss and tragedy, and a future of rapidly diminishing life lived in survival mode.

**Conclusions**

As a discipline deeply concerned with survival, IR must engage robustly with (mass) extinction if it is to offer a meaningful response to one of the most profound events affecting the planet. Moreover, as one of few disciplines overtly concerned with survival, it must confront the boundaries of this condition in order to maintain relevance in its own terms. However, (mass) extinction cannot simply be integrated into existing frameworks of IR, which frame it as a purely ontic problem of managing life and death processes, instead of addressing the be(com)ing and non-being of life forms. This article has shown that it is possible to overcome the conceptual boundaries and normative taboos that make
(mass) extinction unthinkable in current frameworks, making a profound overhaul of the discipline possible. However, is such an overhaul desirable?

This article has argued that it is, not only from the perspective of necessity, but also because it opens up opportunities for profound political creativity. Precisely because (mass) extinction disrupts some of IR’s more entrenched concepts, a new cosmopolitics attuned to extinction and the inhuman can emerge from this framework. This cosmopolitics would: better attune humans to their planetary conditions; dissolve essentialist boundaries that ground regimes of exclusion and oppression; and offer a new form of global ethics rooted in gratitude, experimenttion and an ethos of welcome towards new life forms and worlds. If IR can foster this cosmopolitics, it can move away from the politics of pre-emptive mourning, catastrophe and resilience without hope, and towards one of creativity, unconditional gratitude and hope without guarantees. These responses cannot ensure the long-term survival of homo sapiens or any other species, but they make it possible to nurture and create new forms of flourishing, even in the face of radical finitude.

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Notes

1. The standard definition of a mass extinction event is the extinction of a large proportion (generally 75%) of existing species across all taxa and habitats within a short period of geological time.
2. The term ‘background rate’ refers to the standard rate of extinctions before human intervention became a primary factor.
3. The term ‘mass extinction event’ technically refers to the elimination of over 75% of extant life forms in a relatively brief (geological) time period and can only be assessed retroactively.
4. This concept defines species as organisms that can interbreed.
5. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.
6. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this issue.

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