

Philosophy Lecture Series



Age of Man Environmentalism & Respect for an Independent Nature

Ned Hettinger, Professor of Philosophy

Tuesday, 9/9/14, 3:15 p.m.

Arnold Hall, Jewish Studies Center



“Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do. It is our choice what happens from here.”

Mark Lynas, *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans*. (2011)

The debate over whether we have entered a new geological epoch known as “The Anthropocene” has helped spawn “Age of Man Environmentalism” (AME). According to AME, humans’ planetary scale impact indicates that respect for an independent nature can no longer serve as a guiding value for environmentalism. Traditional environmental goals of nature preservation and restoration are problematically grounded in the illusory ideal of pristine nature. Humans are now fully integrated into nature and have no choice but to become responsible managers of the earth we have created and to govern it according to our ideals.

This talk critically examines AME and defends traditional environmental values of naturalness and respect for nature’s autonomy. AME’s serious exaggeration of the extent of human influence over Earth manifests an anthropocentric narcissism that is blind to the ongoing agency of nature. Rather than becoming gods or parents of a nature that allegedly needs us, human flourishing requires we strengthen our commitment to humility, restraint, and respect for the gifted character of the world. Naturalness is increasingly valuable the more rare it becomes. AME’s insistence on a thoroughly managed future ignores the possibility of rewilding and turning nature loose. Its promotion of non-native species and ill-defined “novel ecosystems” is an attempt to polish the image of human-impacted nature and denigrate the value of preserved wild areas. Taking seriously the massive human impact on earth does not require abandoning traditional environmental values.

A reception will follow in the Philosophy Department, 14 Glebe Street