

Valuing Naturalness in the “Anthropocene”: Now More than Ever

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“Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do. It is our choice what happens from here” (Lynas, 2011).

“Humans neither can nor ought to denature their planet . . . On larger planetary scales it is better to build our cultures in intelligent harmony with the way the world is already built, rather than take control and rebuild this promising planet by ourselves . . . We do not want a de-natured life on a denatured planet” (Rolston, 2012, pp. 26, 46, 48)

Introduction. Recently there has been some serious hype about our entering “the age of man.” Coined by a leading proponent of geoengineering the planet in response to climate change (Crutzen, 2002), the “the Anthropocene” has boosters among environmental scientists and historians, the press, and even environmental philosophers. While a useful way to dramatize the human impact on the planet, the concept is deeply insidious. Most importantly, it threatens the key environmental values of naturalness¹ and respect for nature.² Here I critically assess the interpretation of the human planetary role that the notion of the Anthropocene represents, arguing not only that it seriously exaggerates human influence, but draws inappropriate metaphysical and moral conclusions from this influence. I argue that—despite dramatic human impact on the planet—evaluatively significant naturalness remains and that the ever increasing human influence on nature makes valuing the natural more rather than less important in environmental thought and policy.

Human impacts. There is a debate among geologists about whether the human impact on the earth is significant enough to justify designating a new geological epoch named after us—“the Anthropocene.” There is no question that humans are a dominant species that affects nature on global scales. Humans now consume between 30 and 40% of net primary production and consume more than

¹ By “naturalness,” I mean the extent to which something has not been influenced by humans.

² At least as traditionally understood.

half of all surface fresh water (Vitousek, 1997). We fix more nitrogen than all other terrestrial sources combined (Ibid.). Humans rival the major geologic forces in our propensity to move around soil and rock (Monastersky, 1994). Human overfishing has had massive effects on sea life, our dams control water flow in most of the earth's rivers, and human assisted non-native species are homogenizing the earth's ecosystems (Hettinger, forthcoming). Our contribution to greenhouse gases are predicted to raise the planet's temperature between 2-5 degrees Celsius, affecting climates and thus organisms, globally (Zalasiewicz et al., 2010, p. 2229). Human-caused extinctions are said to be between 10 and 1000 times the background extinction rate (Ibid.). One study concluded that less than 20% of the earth's land surface has escaped direct human influence (Kareiva et al., 2007). Perhaps we are altering the planet on a scale comparable to the major events of the past that mark changes in geological eras.

Interpreting human impacts as justifying the Anthropocene. The idea that we now live in “the age of man” has moved well beyond the narrow geological claim that the fossil record thousands of years from now will bear a distinct difference that can be traced to human influence. Defenders of the Anthropocene concept interpret the facts about human influence as justifying much broader, metaphysical and ethical claims about how humans should think of our role on the planet and the human relationship to nature. Our impact, it is argued, is so now pervasive that the traditional environmental ideals of preservation of nature and respect for it are passé. Naturalness is now gone—or is so tenuous that—the desire to preserve, restore and value it are sentimental pipe-dreams. The human virtues of humility and restraint toward the natural world are no longer possible or desirable and we need to reconcile ourselves to a humanized world and adapt to it. Whether we like it or not, we have been thrust into the role of planetary managers who must engineering nature according to our values and ideals. Rather than bemoan this new world order we should celebrate “the age of man” for it offers us hope for a world in which humans take their responsibilities seriously and are freed from constraints grounded on a misguided desire to preserve a long-gone, pristine nature.

Humans as creating earth. A recent op-ed in the N.Y. Times titled “Hope in the Age of Man” (Marris, 2011) illustrates this worrisome moral and metaphysical perspective. Written by environmental professionals, including the chief scientist for the Nature Conservancy, it argues that viewing our time as “the age of man” is “well-deserved, given humanity’s enormous alteration of earth.” The writers criticize those who worry that the Anthropocene designation will give people the false impression that no place on earth is natural anymore. They suggest that the importance conservation biologists place on protecting the remaining, relatively wild ecosystems depends on the fantasy of “an untouched, natural paradise” and a pernicious and misanthropic “ideal of pristine wilderness.” They conclude with the absurd Promethean claim that “This is the earth we have created” and hence that we should “manage it with love and intelligence” . . . “designing ecosystems” to instantiate “new glories.”

Allen Thompson. Philosophers also have been seduced by the Anthropocene concept and it has led them down a similar path. I here pick on our colleague and friend Allen Thompson. Allen admits that he has “learned to love global warming” (Thompson, 2009). He argues that the anxiety we now feel in response to our new and “awesome responsibility for the flourishing of life on Earth . . . bodes well for humanity” (Ibid., p. 97) and should give us “radical hope” that we can find new type of “environmental goodness . . . distinct from nature’s autonomy” (Thompson, 2010, p. 56).

Responsibility for Earth. Like other proponents of the age of man, Thompson overstates the extent to which humans have influenced nature. At one point he claims “We now know that the fundamental conditions of the biosphere are something that, collectively, we are responsible for” (Thompson, 2009, p. 96). But surely we are not responsible for the existence of sunlight, the photosynthetic capacity of plants, water, gravity, the chemical bonds between molecules, or, more generally, for the diversity of life on the planet! That we have influenced some of these conditions of life, and in some cases drastically, is a far cry from claiming responsibility for them. That humans have obligations to avoid further undermining the life conditions that we have affected is not well put by

claiming we are “responsible” for them. That humans have obligations, for example, not to destroy the beauty or biodiversity of a mountain by removing its top is not to say that we are responsible for the mountain’s beauty or its biodiversity. On the contrary, nature is responsible for those values, humans are not. Even in those cases where we should restore these conditions to ones that are more friendly to the biosphere (perhaps by cleaning a river of pollutants), we ought not say we are responsible for the river’s ability to support life, even though we are responsible for degrading it and we have a responsibility to clean it up.

A charitable reading of Thompson’s “responsibility for the fundamental conditions of the biosphere” language is that he is simply asserting a negative duty to avoid further undermining the naturally given, basic conditions for life on the planet and is not claiming responsibility for their creation. But Thompson, I believe, has more in mind than this. His language suggests a metaphysical claim about the power and importance of humans on the planet. He says, “Once the planet was larger than us, but it no longer is” (Thompson, 2009, p. 97). But the reason given for this new importance of humans—that “there is no corner of the globe, no feature of our biosphere, which escapes the influence of human activity” (Ibid.)—is utterly insufficient to justify such a metaphor. It is undoubtedly true that humans have a greater causal impact on the planet than any other individual species (and have for a while). Further, human influence may be so massive that future geologists will see our impact in the geological record. But this is a far cry from the showing that human causal influence on the earth is greater than the combined causal contributions of the nonhuman geological, chemical, physical, and biological forces of the planet. Humans are a fundamental force shaping the planet, but we are one among many.

Managing nature. Like other boosters of the Anthropocene, Thompson finds in the “age of man” an enhanced authority for humans in our relationship with the planet. He says, “Whether we accept it or not, human beings now shoulder the responsibility of planetary management” (Ibid.). Note that Thompson is here rejecting not only Leopold’s “plain members and citizens” view of humans’ place in

natural world—a view arguably belied by our massive influence on nature—but a number of other conceptions of humans’ relationship with nature: We are not caretakers or restorers of earth, not janitors charged with cleaning up the mess we have made, not repenters charged with making restitution for our destruction, nor healers of a wounded earth. Instead we are managers of this place. Humans are boss. We are in charge. Rather than developing our human capacities for “gratitude, wonder, respect, and restraint” with regard to nature (Rolston, 2012, p. 46), we should take control and (man?)handle the place. Rather than celebrate earth, we humans, “like adoptive parents” need to “enable” the “flourishing” of life on earth (Thompson, 2009, p. 97). But as many have pointed out, the earth does not need us and the non-human world as a whole would be far better off if we weren’t around. Our responsibility toward nature is not mainly to enable nature, but to stop disabling it. Our responsibility toward the planet is not to control and manage it, but—at least in many ways—to loosen our control and impact.³

Naturalness becomes more important the more rare and compromised it is. For Thompson and other boosters, the Anthropocene means that the traditional environmentalism that puts the value of naturalness at its center is dead. “My analysis supports that idea that the environmentalism in the future . . . will hold a significantly diminished place for valuing the good of the autonomy in nature” (Thompson, 2010, p. 54) I think the opposite conclusion is warranted. It is true that there is a decreasing extent of naturalness on the planet and thus there is less of it to value. But it is also true that what remains has become all the more precious. If one starts with the assumption that nature’s autonomy from humanity (its “naturalness”) is valuable and then point out that humans’ control more and more dimensions of the natural world, thereby diminishing its naturalness and making its autonomy increasingly rare, the remaining naturalness increases in value. Rarity is a value enhancing property of things antecedently

³ Perhaps there will come a time where we should manage the climate. If in 100,000 years the current warming period of earth ends and we head back into an ice age like those that preceded the Holocene, humans could then justify manipulating the planet’s climate. But today our obligation is to mitigate our effects on the climate, not to manage it.

judged to be good. Furthermore, if naturalness is a value, then the more it is compromised by human control and domination, the more (not less) important it is to take steps to regain it, as well as protect what remains.

Degrees of naturalness and the importance of valuing diminished naturalness. It is important to note that the naturalness that persists in human-altered or impacted nature is a seriously important object of valuation. Unless one ignores a central point of defenders of the natural—that the natural comes in degrees—and accepts the discredited notion that for something to be natural it must be absolutely pristine, untouched by man (or woman), dimensions of nature can be natural (i.e., relatively autonomous from humans) and valued as such even when they are significantly influenced by humans. Take urban parks as an example: Although clearly significantly shaped by humans, much naturalness remains, and the parks are valued (in large part) for their naturalness by those who enjoy them. They would, for example, be valued much less if the trees were plastic and the birds genetically-engineered. The human person is another example: The fact that humans are thoroughly cultural beings is compatible with there being significantly natural components to us that are valuable and that would be tragically lost if we were to succeed in managing and manipulating our entire nature.

The false dichotomy that nature is either pristine or we created it. A central argument strategy of the Anthropocene boosters is to accuse their opponents of relying on the outdated ideal of pristine nature. On this view, nature must be virginal and untouched by man to really be nature. As a result, we have either reached the end of nature (à la McKibben) or we bask in profound ignorance of widespread human influence. For the most part, this ploy attacks a straw man: Defenders of an environmentalism that places respect for the autonomy of natural world at its center are well aware of the demise of pristine nature on the surface of our planet and this does not undermine their commitment to respect nature's autonomy. Ironically, Anthropocene boosters themselves often equate nature with pristine nature and then rely on the false dichotomy: Either nature is pristine or it is created (or

domesticated) by humans! Here are a couple of examples:

An interesting way to look at nature now in the Anthropocene is that nature is something that we create . . . There is really nothing around that has not been touched by us. And if there is something that hasn't been touched by us that was a decision for the most part . . . Nature is something you have to nurture yourself, like your garden (Ellis, video interview).

There really is no such thing as nature untainted by people. Instead, ours is a world of nature domesticated, albeit to varying degree, from national parks to high-rise megalopolises (Kareiva et al, 2007, 3rd para.).

So while the Anthropocene boosters criticize the McKibben ideal of pristine nature which leads McKibben to the absurd conclusion that “we now live in a world of our own making” (McKibben, 1989, p. 85), they arrive at the same conclusion and for pretty much the same reasons! But as I've argued significant naturalness remains and it is possible and desirable to value diminished naturalness. So there is plenty left for the defender of traditional “naturalness” environmentalism to value and defend.

Naturalness can return. Furthermore, Anthropocene boosters ignore that humanization can flush out of human-impacted natural systems and that greater degrees of naturalness can return (Hettinger and Throop, 1999). That restoration, rewilding, and just letting naturalness come back on its own are desirable environmental policies (though certainly not the only environmental goals) is something else that the Anthropocene boosters seem to reject.⁴ Note that nature need not returned to its original state or trajectory for naturalness to be enhanced; the lessening of human control and influence on the course of nature is sufficient. Thus the complaint that the defenders of nature's autonomy want to set back the clock and preserve museum pieces of earlier pristine nature is another straw man. Even if it is true, as Anthropocene proponents insist, that there is “no going back,” that does not mean that the only path forward is a thoroughly managed future increasingly devoid of naturalness. That leaving nature alone to head off into a trajectory that we do not specify is itself a “management decision” does not show that this

⁴ Restoration, even though it involves human activity, can speed up this flushing out of human influence on nature. Anthropocene boosters seem to want environmental policy to move on from preservation and restoration of a gifted nature to the creation of new “nature.”

trajectory is a human controlled or impacted one.

Palmer on climate change and nonhumans. Two recent papers on the ethics climate change support my claim that the value of naturalness remains crucial for environmentalism and environmental philosophy. Clare Palmer has argued that contrary to what many think, it may be difficult to object to climate change because of what it does to nonhumans. She argues that it is not clear that, *on balance*, climate change will harm nonhuman organisms, species, or ecosystems: “While climate change will have significant negative impacts, it will also drive speciation, change some ecosystems without destroying them, produce organisms that would not otherwise have existed, and promote the flourishing of at least some species, ecosystems, and individual organisms” (Palmer, 2011, p. 291). She concludes that “though climate change does raise ethical problems in a nonhuman context, these problems are more restricted in scope and more complex in form than we might intuitively think” (Palmer, 2011, p. 273).

While I think the negative impact of climate change on nonhuman organism, species and ecosystems is more severe and negative overall than Palmer’s evaluation suggests, the main problem with seeing her arguments as undermining non-anthropocentric reasons for objecting to climate change is that she does not consider the negative impacts to naturalness that climate change poses. Perhaps it makes more sense to see climate change as altering ecosystems rather than harming them. Perhaps climate change will spur speciation (and species diversity) as much as it will retard it. Perhaps climate change will create a greater number of organisms than it destroys. But if one values *natural* speciation and *relatively naturally given* organisms and ecosystems over ones significantly impacted and altered by humans, then climate change remains a significant problem from a non-anthropocentric environmental perspective even given Palmer’s bold conclusions. If we give up on the value of naturalness, we have no such response to Palmer’s conclusions.

Jamieson on climate change and duty to respect nature. Dale Jamieson also has a recent

paper that supports the ongoing importance of valuing naturalness.⁵ Jamieson argues that our paradigms of political and moral responsibility are not easily adapted to addressing climate change and concludes: “I suspect that unless a duty of respect for nature is widely recognized and acknowledged, there will be little hope of successfully addressing the problem of climate change” (Jamieson, 2010, p. 443) For Jamieson, the duty to respect nature is violated when humans attempt to dominate nature by sufficiently undermining its self-caused, autonomous nature. If Jamieson is right that valuing naturalness in the sense of recognizing a duty to respect an autonomous nature is necessary to successfully address climate change, then naturalness is clearly an environmental value that remains crucially important for environmental ethics and policy—even in the supposed age of man.

Conclusion. I view the recent focus on the age of man as the latest embodiment of human hubris. It manifests a culpable failure to appreciate the profound role nonhuman nature continues to play on earth and an arrogant overvaluation of human’s role and authority. It not only ignores an absolutely crucial value in a proper respect for nature but leads us astray in environmental policy. It will have us downplaying the importance of nature preservation and restoration and promoting ecosystem invention and geoengineering. At its extreme, it is a generalization of Martha Nussbaum’s suggested response to predation in nature as requiring “a gradual supplanting of the natural with the just” (Nussbaum 2006, 399). Further, by promoting the idea that we live on an already domesticated planet, it risks the result that monetary and public support for conservation will seem futile and dry up (Caro et al., 2011). We should not get comfortable with the Anthropocene as some have suggested but rather fight it. Such comfort is not the virtue reconciliation, but the vice of capitulation.

⁵ For many years, Jamieson has been one of the most consistent and articulate defenders of the value of the natural. See . . .

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