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Valuing Naturalness in the "Anthropocene": Now More than Ever

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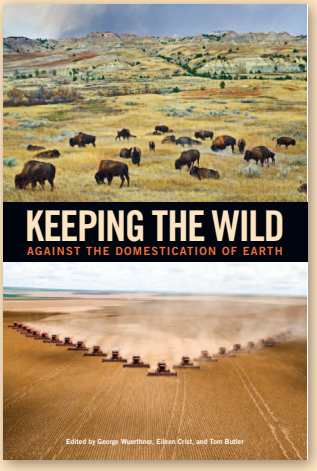

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RECENTLY THERE HAS BEEN some serious hype about entering "the age of man." Popularized by a leading proponent of geoengineering the planet in response to climate change,[1] "the Anthropocene" has boosters among environmental scientists, historians, and philosophers, as well as the press. 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 "naturalness" (by which I mean the degree to which nature is not influenced by humans) and respect for nature. This essay is a critical assessment of the Anthropocene notion, arguing not only that it seriously exaggerates human influence on nature but also that it draws inappropriate metaphysical, moral, and environmental policy conclusions about humanity's role on the planet. Despite our dramatic impact on Earth, significant naturalness remains, and the ever-increasing human influence makes valuing the natural more, not less, important in environmental thought and policy.

Some geologists have been debating whether the human impact on 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 a global scale. Humans now consume between 30 and 40 percent of net primary production, use more than half of all surface freshwater, and fix more nitrogen than all other terrestrial sources combined.[2] Humans rival the major geologic forces in our propensity to move soil and rock around.[3] Overfishing has had massive effects on sea life; our dams control water flow in most major rivers; and human-assisted, nonnative species are homogenizing Earth's ecosystems. Our contribution to greenhouse gases is predicted to raise the planet's temperature 2°C–5°C, affecting climates, and thus organisms, globally.[4] Human-caused extinctions are said to be between 100 and 1,000 times the background extinction rate.[5] One study concluded that less than 20 percent of land surface has escaped direct human influence.[6] It appears likely that we are altering the planet on a scale comparable to the major events of the past that mark changes in geological epochs.

However, 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. Some proponents of the Anthropocene concept interpret the facts about human influence as justifying broad metaphysical and ethical claims about how we should think of the human relationship to nature. Our impact, it is argued, is now so pervasive that the traditional environmental ideals of preservation of nature and respect for it are passé. Naturalness is now either gone or 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 engineer nature according to our values and ideals. Rather than bemoan or resist 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.

A recent op-ed in the *New York Times* titled "Hope in the Age of Man" illustrates this worrisome moral and metaphysical perspective.[7] Written by environmental professionals, 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 placed by conservation biologists 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."

Philosophers have also been seduced by the Anthropocene concept, and it has led them down a similar path. I focus here on some writings by Allen Thompson, an environmental philosopher from Oregon State University. Thompson claims to have found a way to "love global warming."[8] 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"[9] and should give us "radical hope" that we can find a new type of "environmental goodness . . . distinct from nature's autonomy."[10]

Like other proponents of the age of man, Thompson overstates the extent to which humans have influenced nature. At one point he claims that "we now know that the fundamental conditions of the biosphere are something that, collectively, we are responsible for."[11] But surely we are not responsible for the existence of sunlight, gravity,

or water; nor for the photosynthetic capacity of plants, the biological process of predation, or the chemical bonds between molecules; nor, more generally, for the diversity of life on the planet or its spectacular geology! That we have influenced some of these conditions of life, and in some cases significantly, is a far cry from being responsible 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. To propose that humans have an obligation, for example, to not 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 cannot claim 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 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 writes: "Once the planet was larger than us, but it no longer is."[12] 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"[13]—is utterly insufficient to justify such a metaphor. It is undoubtedly true that humans have a greater causal impact on the planet than does any other individual species (and have for a while). Human influence may be so massive that future geologists will see our impact in the geological record. But this is a far cry from showing that human causal influence on Earth is greater than the combined causal contributions of the nonhuman geological, chemical, physical, and biological forces. Humans are a fundamental force shaping the planet, but we are one among many.

Like other Anthropocene boosters, Thompson finds in the "age of man" an enhanced authority for humans in our relationship with the planet. He asserts that "whether we accept it or not, human beings now shoulder the responsibility of planetary management."[14] Note that what Thompson rejects here is not only Leopold's "plain member and citizen" view of our place in the natural world, but also 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 those who repent and try to make restitution for our destruction, nor healers of a wounded Earth. Instead we are managers—we are in charge—of this place. Humans are boss. Rather than develop our human capacities for "gratitude, wonder, respect, and restraint"[15] with regard to nature, we should take control and handle the place. Rather than celebrate Earth, we humans, "like adoptive parents," need to "enable" the "flourishing" of life.[16] But as many have pointed out, Earth does not need us, and the nonhuman 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.

For Thompson and other boosters, the Anthropocene means that the traditional environmentalism that places the value of naturalness at its center is dead. "My analysis supports that idea that environmentalism in the future . . . will hold a significantly diminished place for valuing the good of the autonomy in nature."[17] 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 is valuable, and one then points out that humans control more and more dimensions of the natural world—thereby diminishing its naturalness and making its autonomy increasingly rare—then the remaining naturalness increases in value. Rarity is a value-enhancing property of those things antecedently 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.

The naturalness that persists in human-altered or human-impacted nature is a seriously important object of valuation. Unless one ignores a central point maintained by defenders of the natural—that naturalness comes in degrees—and accepts the discredited notion that in order for something to be natural it must be absolutely pristine, then dimensions of nature can be natural (that is, relatively autonomous from humans) and can be valued as such even when they have been significantly influenced by humans. Take urban parks as an example: Although signifi-

cantly shaped by humans, they retain much naturalness, and these 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.

A central strategy of the Anthropocene boosters is to accuse their opponents of accepting an outdated ideal of pristine nature. In this view, nature must be virginal and untouched to really be nature. As a result, we have either reached the end of nature (à la McKibben)[18] 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 prioritizes respect for the autonomy of the natural world are well aware of the demise of pristine nature, yet this does not undermine their commitment to respect, and—where possible—to enhance or reestablish, nature's autonomy.

Ironically, the Anthropocene boosters themselves frequently rely on the idea of nature as pristine and use it to invoke the false dichotomy: Either nature is pristine or it is created (or domesticated) by humans. Consider a few comments expressed by current Anthropocene proponents: "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, *just* like your garden";[19] and, "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."[20]

So while the Anthropocene boosters criticize the McKibben ideal of pristine nature (which led Bill McKibben to the absurd conclusion that "we now live in a world of our own making"[21]), 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. There is plenty left to value and defend for the advocates of traditional "naturalness" environmentalism.

Furthermore, Anthropocene boosters ignore the potential for humanization to *flush out* of human-impacted natural systems and the real possibility for greater degrees of naturalness to return.[22] 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. Note that nature need not return to some original, baseline state or trajectory for naturalness to be enhanced; the lessening of human control and influence on the course of nature is sufficient. Even if, as proponents of the Anthropocene insist, it is true 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 ostensibly a "management decision" does not show that this trajectory is a human-controlled or human-impacted one.

In conclusion, I see 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, restoration, and rewilding and also have us promoting ecosystem invention and geoengineering. 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.[23] We should not get comfortable with the Anthropocene, as some have suggested, but rather fight it. Such comfort is not the virtue of reconciliation, but the vice of capitulation.

NOTES

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