

The Anthropocene

DISTURBING NAME, LIMITED INSIGHT

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Upon seeing a new plant, the first question an amateur botanist asks is, what's its name? That is often also the last question. When we know a thing's name, we think we know a great deal about it. When we are sick, we are desperate to know the name of the disease. Cure or no cure, we receive some comfort knowing that the disease has a name and knowing what that name is.

Any sailor will tell you that renaming a sailboat is not to be taken lightly. Some suggest three separate ceremonies: one to remove the previous name, another to de-name the boat, and still another to rename the boat. Poseidon, the god of the sea, is said to personally register the name of each and every boat in his Ledger of the Deep. Callousness or ceremonial miscues are believed to evoke the wrath of the sea god. Penalty can range from mechanical failure to shipwreck.

The act of naming is serious business.

Disturbing Name

By 2016, the International Commission on Stratigraphy's Working Group on the "Anthropocene" will formally decide whether or not we live in the Anthropocene, literally the epoch of humans. Many scholars with no significant knowledge or interest in geology are not waiting for permission to use that name. They conceptualize the Anthropocene in various ways. Some, for example, are relatively descriptive, referring to "an unprece-

dent period of profound global change as a result of human activity." Other conceptualizations have an overtly normative overture, characterizing the Anthropocene as "the human centered period on Earth," "a geological epoch defined by our very presence," and even "the Age of Humans."

Whether the conditions are right for demarcating a new geologic epoch on the basis of stratigraphy or other geologic processes is a judgment best left to geologists. However, geologists do sometimes select peculiar names for various segments on the geologic timeline. For example, geologists divide the history of the earth into three periods. The third period is named "Quaternary," meaning "fourth." The history of geologic science explains why the Quaternary has this name—we do not doubt an explanation exists. The current epoch within the Quaternary is named the "Holocene," meaning "entirely recent"—a name that, two or three epochs from now, might seem a bit silly. We are simply pointing out that geologists might not always display the best judgment in naming. This time the consequences of naming are significant.

Our concern with the name "Anthropocene" is the considerable risk it represents for reinforcing and perhaps celebrating a poor relationship between humans and nature. Naming something or someone after oneself runs the risk of great hubris. Hubris is one of the great problems with our relationship to nature. So why would we give a name—to something as grand as a geologic epoch—that risks encouraging or celebrating further hubris?

To some the label "Anthropocene" serves as a reminder that the condition of the world is now harmful to humans. If such a reminder were important, it would be wise to avoid a label risking confusion with a celebration of human dominance, and to choose a more accurate one—such as "Malanthropocene."

Naming the current epoch, the "Anthropocene" or "Malanthropocene" might not motivate anything at all. It may only inspire disempowerment and undermine efforts to heal our re-

lationship with nature because it has been ruined beyond the point of healing. That kind of hopelessness will not serve our desperate need to heal our relationship with nature.

The name “Anthropocene” also runs the risk of indulging misanthropy, the idea that humans are inherently bad for nature. Kathleen Dean Moore reminds us that “we don’t name new epochs after the destructive force that ended the epoch that came before.” If that were a wise basis for naming, then Moore suggests (with considerable sarcasm) we also consider these alternative names:

Name the onrushing epoch after a place where the boundary between the rubble of the old era and the new is clearly seen? Then perhaps we are entering the Dubai-cene, for that mirage city built of petroleum . . . If we name it after the layers of rubble that will pile up during the extinction of most of the plants and animals of the Holocene — the ruined remains of so many of the living beings we grew up with, buried in human waste — then we are entering the Obscene Epoch. It’s from the Latin: *ob-* (heap onto) and *-caenum* (filth).

Is and Ought

Many scholars invoke the idea of “our living in the Anthropocene” as an *argument* for why we ought to begin relating to nature in one particular way or another. Some conclude that living in the Anthropocene means we ought to begin living within earthly limits or planetary boundaries. Others conclude we ought to begin geo-engineering the oceans and atmosphere. How can one circumstance give rise to such wildly different conclusions about how we ought to behave?

The problem is that “living in the Anthropocene” is not an *argument*. It cannot, by itself, support any conclusion for how we *ought* to behave. To say that we “live in the Anthropocene” is

to describe a circumstance, to pronounce a condition, to depict a certain state of how the world *is*. Because the Anthropocene is conceptualized in such varied ways, it is often not clear precisely what circumstance is being referenced. The problem with that kind of logic is laid bare by one of the most basic principles in ethics: the centuries old idea that *ought* does not, as a principle of logic, follow from *is* alone.

Disregard for the logical necessity of ethics is illustrated by the vision for conservation in the Anthropocene promulgated by Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier. Their view begins with a critique of M. E. Soulé’s vision for conservation (in the Holocene) whose foundation is a set of explicitly normative premises. Those ethical premises are (1) diversity of organisms is good; (2) ecological complexity is good; (3) evolution is good; and (4) biotic diversity has intrinsic value, irrespective of its instrumental or utilitarian value. These ethical premises may be appropriate (or not), they may be sufficient (or not), and they may have been mishandled by Soulé (or not). The salient point is that Soulé recognized the logical necessity of invoking ethical premises in drawing conclusions about how we ought to behave.

Kareiva and Marvier explicitly dismiss the need to rely on those or any normative principles when they write: “We deviate from this approach and, instead, offer practical statements of what conservation should do in order to succeed.” Those “practical statements,” however, represent strong support for an anthropocentric ethic and worldview. Anthropocentrism is not a fact that can be deduced exclusively from the premise that we live in a period of profound global change as a result of human activity, or from any descriptive claim about how the world is. Anthropocentrism is an ethical claim, and a deeply contested ethical claim at that, that requires an argument with explicit reference to ethical premises (in addition to claims about how the world is). To see how that argument is not merely inadequate but entirely lacking from the vision of Kareiva and Marvier, one

only has to compare their essay with the substantial literature dealing with the ethics of anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism.

Persuasive and influential as they may be, similar concerns rise from, for example, the writings of William Steffen, Paul Crutzen, and colleagues in their implied presumption that anthropocentrism is the foundation for our relationship with nature and tacit support for focusing on technological “solutions” without adequately appreciating the problem of overconsumption. We are not saying these authors fail to make any sound and valid arguments. They do. They provide robust arguments for the conclusion that we live in a period of profound global change as a result of human activity. Those arguments are powerful for implying that such a conclusion is tremendously relevant for understanding how we ought to behave. However, many who assert how we ought to behave (in the Anthropocene) do not actually support that assertion with adequate argumentation, and often offer no argumentation at all.

Steffen and colleagues succinctly summarize these concerns when they write:

The Anthropocene is a reminder that the Holocene, during which complex human societies have developed, has been a stable, accommodating environment and is the only state of the Earth System that we know for sure can support contemporary society.

The subtle but deeply important sin of omission in that sentiment, which seems to permeate their writings, is failing to ask the question, “What aspects of contemporary society ought we continue supporting?” Are hubris, greed, injustice, disregard for the nonhuman world, and overconsumption the elements of contemporary society that we ought to continue supporting?

Limited Insight

Questions about how we ought to relate to nature and what counts as a wise and healthy relationship with nature have always been difficult, weighty questions. For example, Is conservation an anthropocentric endeavor or a nonanthropocentric endeavor? Is an ecosystem healthy to the extent that humans have not affected it? Or is an ecosystem healthy so long as it produces what we want without diminishing its future capacity to produce what we want?

Consider the meaning of sustainability, which might usefully be defined as “meeting human needs in a socially just manner without depriving ecosystems of their health.” Depending on how a society understands concepts like ecosystem health, sustainability could mean anything from “exploit as much as desired without infringing on future ability to exploit as much as desired” to “exploit as little as necessary to maintain a meaningful life.” Those two attitudes represent wildly different ways of relating to nature and would result in wildly different worlds.

Questions about the goals of conservation and our relationship with nature are difficult to answer. They were difficult questions in the Holocene, and they will be difficult in any new epoch. To simply add “in the Anthropocene” to the end of a question like “What is sustainability?” adds little insight for *how* we should answer the question, and the conceptual obstacles to answering those questions are no more or less weighty.

Recognizing that we live in the Anthropocene (or that we live in a period of profound global change as a result of human activity) certainly constrains the range of options for how we could possibly behave. Those constraints are not always appreciated, though they should be. For example, the existence of seven billion humans obligates us to feed seven billion people, but does not specify how we go about producing the food to do this, nor does it specify what should be done (if anything) about how many people there might be in the future. Nevertheless, within

the constraints that exist there is a great deal of latitude for how we might behave, and highlighting that we live in the Anthropocene adds little insight for understanding how we ought to behave, given that range of options.

Perhaps adding “in the Anthropocene” (as in “What is conservation in the Anthropocene?”) raises the stakes to the question. Forty-five years ago there were six billion people on the planet; today, more than seven billion. Certainly the stakes are higher—though they have been high for quite a while. Those high stakes in the past did not inspire us to demonstrate any great aptitude for developing broad consensus for wise answers to questions about how we ought to relate to nature. It is far from obvious that our aptitude will improve simply by suggesting the stakes are higher.

On the contrary, the prospect of the Anthropocene has led many to regress to particularly primitive logic. We seem to be developing and condoning a scholarly habit that represents its own new class of logical fallacy, *Argumentum ad Anthropocenum*. The structure of this invalid argument is

Premise 1: We live in the Anthropocene.

Conclusion: Therefore, we ought to X (for X substitute whatever behavior you like)

Conclusion

“So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Genesis 2:19). That act of naming has been associated with our despotic relationship with nature. It may pale in comparison to the despotism associated with naming the next geological epoch after ourselves.

Objecting to that concern by insisting that the Anthropocene is simply an objective reality (i.e., living in a human-dominated

world) only heightens the concern because that insistence too easily becomes an inappropriate basis for endorsing that despotism. That is, the “Anthropocene” is disturbing in each case that it has been used to promulgate some ethical orientation, but does so under the guise of science. To do so is to misuse two great institutions of civilization—science and ethics. It is a misuse that risks considerable harm to the environment, human welfare, and our humanity.

Robust arguments have already been made for how and why the key to wise relationships with nature depends on a set of virtues that include precaution, humility, empathy, and rationality (i.e., the capacity to articulate a sound and valid argument comprised of premises invoking scientific and ethical principles and the employment of that capacity in decision making). The need to have exercised those virtues was vitally important (and largely neglected) in the Holocene. Those virtues will be vitally important in any new epoch and will indicate the wisdom of, for example, various forms of geo-engineering and the extent to which ecosystem health will depend on human intervention. The deep concern is that we live in a culture with too little capacity or interest in those virtues. Moreover, hubris and misanthropy are serious obstacles to that set of virtues. Naming the Anthropocene seems to work against our need to become familiar with and practiced at those virtues.