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Against Anthropocentrism

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

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I would like to thank [Paul Raskin](#) for so effectively setting the table for this important discussion. However, I will suggest that the term “Anthropocene” is ultimately self-defeating. Even as it tries to draw attention to a planetary existential crisis, it further normalizes and perpetuates the kind of common sense which has helped to precipitate that crisis in the first place.

As a historian who specializes in the study of non-modern ways of life, I do not see history in conventional modernist terms as the biography of a unitary human species, a story set in a single universal world of experience where a generic Anthropos figure steadily fumbles its way toward modernity. Along with an ever-swelling cohort of indigenous activists, ecological campaigners, and academic theorists, I think it is more historically meaningful to suppose that humans have always lived in a “pluriverse” of many worlds, not in a universe of just one. From this radically altered perspective, history then becomes a loose entanglement of many stories about a multitude of different peoples, each one enacting its own particular model of reality, with its own distinctive way of being human, its own “human nature.”

Of course, mainstream modern scientific thought is inclined to dismiss all non-modern models of reality as pure figments of a “primitive imagination,” as just “myth” or “folklore.” But it is undeniable that innumerable such models have succeeded in practice on their own terms. Together, they have anchored norms and mechanisms which have sustained many millions of real human lives over many millennia without catastrophic damage to the fabrics of the planet. Why is this? Well, in non-modern worlds, humans are never alone. They always co-exist with non-human persons, subjects, or agencies of various kinds, actively cooperating, collaborating, and sometimes socializing with them to perpetuate life as they know it.

For some, like the ancient Greeks, ancient Egyptians, and peoples of pre-modern China and India, these non-human co-producers of the world might take the form of superhuman agencies, beings who control and/or embody things like sunshine, rainfall, land, crops, and bodily health that are essential to life's continuity. For others, like so many indigenous peoples of the Americas, most if not all the contents of Creation itself, including phenomena that we consider "abiotic" like rocks and winds, are fully alive as beings or persons, all actively contributing to the shared cause of a good, balanced life in their cosmos, sometimes as relatives or kin of their human counterparts. Whatever the case, being in such worlds is always in some sense relational. Humans know themselves as integral parts of a larger whole. Like everything else, they are mere threads in the symbiotic fabrics of existence. Like everything else, they are effectively made of the relations with all those things which make their lives possible in the first place.

In this as in so many other respects, the bizarre, exotic exception to the historical rule is of course the world of our own European-style modernity, whose conditions of possibility include the colonialist domination and/or elimination of non-Europeans, the enslavement of non-white peoples, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment.

Our novel capitalist way of life is anchored by a model of reality where being is not relational but fundamentally individuated, a function of the innate properties of all the countless discrete self-actualizing entities, human and non-human, which occupy space in our universe. Within this modern model, individuals of the human species are the only possible subjects, since *Anthropos* alone is innately endowed with personhood, reason, and agency. The world thus inevitably resolves into two distinct orders: a higher human order of "culture," which monopolizes subjectivity and agency, and a lower non-human order of "nature," which contains merely impersonal objects and subject-less processes, a mere "environment" of passive exploitable "resources." And these twin metaphysical commitments to anthropocentrism and individualism duly make possible our model's peculiar "objective" way of apprehending experience, whereby the solipsistic *Anthropos* presumes to know the world like a god, as if from outside, from everywhere at once and nowhere in particular.

This historically bizarre model of reality has been realized in experience through our life-sustaining practices for just a few hundred years, but the results are already pretty plain to see.

To name just a few: genocides and ethnocides across entire continents; the dehumanization of innumerable slaves and industrial helots; two devastating world wars; the Holocaust; the use of nuclear weapons; epidemics of mental illness and drug addiction; species extinctions; environmental degradation of all kinds; and, of course, global warming. In relatively short order, we find ourselves in a time of planetary existential crisis that some call the Anthropocene.

So why not call it the Anthropocene? Because by suggesting that Anthropos is directly harming “nature,” the term perpetuates our anthropocentric commitment to a world that is forever divided between an order of active human subjects and one of passive non-human objects, the very commitment that helped make this crisis possible in the first place. After all, phenomena like global warming and rising sea levels are not unilaterally “caused” by humans. They are outcomes of complex interactions between human practices and the life processes of the planet.

It is far more productive to see the crisis from an alternative, pluriversal perspective, one that draws on bodies of knowledge which have informed the enactment of so many successful non-modern models of reality. This uncommon sense would allow us to see our world otherwise as a unitary system of life, one where humans are fully integrated into the fabrics of being, where non-humans express forms of agency and subjectivity, and where all things are defined and shaped by their symbiotic interrelations with others.

We would then see our current crisis through new eyes, as a complete breakdown in reciprocity between human and non-human relatives, as a life-threatening imbalance that urgently needs to be corrected. And we would see Anthropos as history’s most delusional and disruptive way of being human. If new practices can be devised which enact more relational, non-modern-style models of reality, this grotesquely deviant form of humanity will hopefully wither away, along with its systemic racism, its capitalist economics, its individualist politics and sociality, and its dangerously self-serving “objective” knowledge.

About the Author



Greg Anderson is Professor of History at Ohio State University. His teaching and research combine interests in historical thought and practice, contemporary critical theory, and the experiences of non-modern peoples. His recent work, such as *The Realness of Things Past: Ancient Greece and Ontological History*, makes the case for an “ontological turn” in historical practice, arguing on ethical, philosophical, and historical grounds that we need to analyze every historical lifeworld on its own ontological terms, in effect as a world unto itself. He holds a PhD in classics from Yale University.

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