

Unsettling anthropocentrism

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Abstract This paper provides a brief critique of anthropocentrism and introduces the papers of the special theme issue on “non-anthropocentric conceptions of nature.”

Keywords Anthropocentrism · Human supremacy · Worldview

In an article titled “Robochop,” *The Economist* reported a practical problem and its technological solution. The problem was that swarms of jellyfish clogged up the pipes of a Swedish nuclear power plant on the Baltic Sea coast, forcing the plant’s temporary shutdown. The proposed solution involved utilizing an invention of “a fleet of killer robots that turn jellyfish into mush.” The devices known as JEROS (Jellyfish Elimination Robotic Swarms) are designed to follow a lead robot and work in formation: They can apparently chop up to 900 km of jellyfish an hour.¹

The report raises an irrepressible question: Is there not something wrong—even deeply disturbing—about this picture?

Questioning anthropocentrism is far more than an academic exercise of debating the dominant cultural motif of placing humans at the center of material and ethical concerns. It is a fertile way of shifting the focus of attention away from the problem symptoms of our time (be these symptoms as far-reaching as rapid climate change

¹ *The Economist*, “Robochop: An automated jellyfish exterminator takes to sea.” October 19, 2013.

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or as inconvenient as “just” jellyfish jamming the machine) to the investigation of root causes. And certainly the dominant beliefs, values, and attitudes guiding human action constitute a significant driver of the pressing problems of our day.

What does it mean to position *anthropos* in the center? The question might initially be broached in a non-anthropocentric way, by attending to who and what, as a consequence of human-centeredness, becomes displaced to the periphery. The displacements over the long course of history have been innumerable but might be grouped into two comprehensive categories: the ideational and material dislocations of nonhumans, “subhumans,”² and wild nature into the fringes of earthly landscapes and human mindscapes alike. The ideational displacement has been instigated by means of a Western cognitive framework that has regularly inquired into “the nature of the human” through posing the question: How are humans *Different* from all other life forms? Political scientist John Rodman called this ubiquitous aporia of Western thought “the Differential Imperative.”³ There has been no shortage of proffered differences—usually conceived as gaping chasms—between the human and nonhuman (or “subhuman”) in the course of history: reason, language, morality, civilization, technology, and free will are all examples of championed distinctive qualities, which, importantly, have been regarded as *lacking* in nonhumans. The dominant ideas of the Western tradition have primarily—and especially as a distilled and conditioning missive—not only exalted Man and his attributes but simultaneously portrayed nonhumans to be deficient by comparison. This ideational displacement has flowed from the Differential Imperative’s compulsion to story the assemblage of living beings on Earth as a hierarchical narrative.

Alongside hierarchical notions have been the material displacements of the other-than-(civilized)-human world. We live in world in which a series of civilizations, empires, and societies have destroyed forests, plowed grasslands under, drained wetlands, dewatered, diverted, and controlled rivers, dominated lakes and (more recently) seas, and overall roundly used nature for material ends. Alongside these impacts on natural landscapes, wild animals have been killed, persecuted, enslaved, forced to flee to ever more remote places, and driven to regional or total extinction. In similar fashion, certain humans have been labeled as animal, subhuman, or savage and often endured subjugation and genocide. Briefly, wild nature, wildlife, and “inferior” people have been subjected (and continue to be subjected) to incremental and large-scale physical dislocations.

The ideational and physical dimensions of anthropocentrism have reinforced one another in the pattern of a positive feedback loop. Physical power over the nonhuman and “subhuman” world has buttressed the cultural conviction of human

² The word “subhuman” has been applied to both animals (especially primates) and indigenous people. Throughout this Introduction, we use it with purposeful ambiguity as a catch-all derogatory concept that has, in different contexts, targeted nonhumans and human beings. See Williams (2012).

³ Rodman (1980). The focus on Western anthropocentrism is warranted by the present-day world dominance of Western culture and by the fact that this culture has a long historical legacy of anthropocentric orientation toward the natural world. Two qualifications are in order: One, anthropocentrism is not a monopoly of Western societies; and two, there have been intellectual currents and subcultures within the Western world that have opposed it.

superiority and that strengthening conviction has worked as justification and guideline for increasing domination over perceived inferior realms of being. The interplay of cognitive belittlement and physical conquest defines the chief dialectic of anthropocentrism. The synthesis of its mutually reinforcing dimensions—of the ideas and technics of subjugation—constitutes its solidification into a lived worldview. Borrowing from social theorist Jürgen Habermas’ explication of the idea of “worldview,”⁴ the worldview of self-elevated civilized humanity comprises a widespread, underlying framework tying together a multiplicity of action orientations within which human entitlement is always already automatically guaranteed.

During the long course of history, quickening with the conquest of the New World and the industrial revolution, and accelerating to light speed after World War II, the Human Center has all but overtaken the whole, displacing into the peripheries of invisibility all that is “uncivilized.” As the center has expanded, the world has become increasingly humanized, tame, and more predictable. Civilized humanity leaves its deliberate and inadvertent marks everywhere. It also contains and frames the world in the semblance of what philosopher Martin Heidegger called a “world picture.”⁵ The world’s places and beings are comprehensively categorized by naming, classifications, surveillances, rules, and framings. Nothing remains that cannot be figuratively or literally rendered as a postcard, tracked via satellite map, GPS, or other technology, and tagged for whatever uses it might yield now or in reserve. Ultimately, with the advent of today’s technoindustrial era, the expanded center has thickened its technological networks so that the world is well en route to being fully gridded by ever-expanding lines of transportation, electrification, communication, and trade.

The ideational and physical decentering of the other-than-(civilized)-human, along with the biosphere’s concomitant humanization, have generated a reigning, shared understanding of Earth as a stage for civilized humanity to manifest its great destiny, as a physical backdrop (and even “starter planet” in visions of extraterrestrial expansion) for civilization’s march, and as a sort of cosmic human property. The original ontology of Earth as inexhaustible, largely unknown, enchanted, mysterious, and more encompassing has been supervened, while the man-made ontology of the civilized human has become physically entrenched and certainly conceptually reified. This ontological inversion of a part (anthropos) claiming the whole (the biosphere) has transpired over history’s course, until today,

⁴ “Worldviews lay down the framework of fundamental concepts within which we interpret everything that appears in the world in a specific way as something.” Further down, citing anthropologist Robin Horton, Habermas describes worldviews as “regulat[ing] our dealings with external reality, with what can be perceived or handled in the objective world, in such a way as to exclude alternatives” (Habermas 1984). Given the immense breadth of actions toward and uses of the natural world that anthropocentrism can legitimate and guide, its characterization as a worldview seems amply justified.

⁵ Heidegger (1977). For Heidegger the era of modern techno-science inaugurated the age of the world picture. He writes that “world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture. What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first *is* in being and *only is* in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth” (129–130, emphases added). From an ecological perspective what Heidegger’s words point toward is that the post-Enlightenment colonization of the biosphere is simultaneously representational and physical. As the natural world’s ontology is remade, the remaking as such is reified within the collective’s experience.

to paraphrase social theorist Guy Debord, Man and his Works are virtually all there is to see.⁶

Anthropocentrism can be dissected by looking at it thus “from the outside in,” in terms of who and what has become dislocated to the world’s edges and beyond the mindscape’s awareness or concern. But looking at it from the “inside out” adds an indispensable understanding of anthropocentrism’s upshot: The self-placement of Man at the Center has disallowed a vantage point from which any need or desire for limiting human expansionism might be discerned. By virtue of how it constituted itself, human-centeredness has spawned an enterprise that can only grow (Thus, the modern era “religion of growth” may have its metaphysical foundations in the anthropocentric worldview.).

The reason for this is that a call for limitations comes within a society’s horizon in one of two ways: either from inner restraint arising from respect toward others (nonhuman and human neighbors); or from external resistance successfully thwarting that society’s expansionism. Both these sources of limitations to the civilized enterprise have been disabled by the anthropocentric worldview. Moral consideration for nonhumans (as well as for devalued humans), and respect for their intrinsic being and homelands, have been virtually annihilated via ideational disparagements: thus inner restraint has found no worthy grounds. What’s more, forests, rivers, mountains, wild animals, and indigenous people have been quite unable to halt the advent of the civilized conqueror: External resistance has been nonexistent or futile. The Human Center—wherein civilized humans have deemed themselves supreme and unrivaled—has thereby willy-nilly relinquished any standpoint from which to discern any reason to limit itself. This is a clear-cut consequence of anthropocentrism and as such it has *happened to* Man beyond his deliberate choosing.

As long as no adverse repercussions arose to discomfit civilized humanity’s march, the consequences of no limitations have been either unproblematic or unperceived. Auks, passenger pigeons, thylacines, and baiji, to mention a handful among countless unknown and known beings, have been extinguished. Animal populations and especially carnivores like wolves, cougars, bears, sharks, lions, tigers, and many others have declined precipitously. The numbers of fish, sea turtles, whales, and other sea mammals have taken a nosedive, while forests have receded, deserts expanded, topsoil evanesced, and rivers and lakes been thinned of life. Indigenous ways and languages also became and are becoming extinct. None of these events—if perceived at all—have been perceived as existentially or ethically problematic.

And so, when with demeaning intent Man rendered the *more*-than-human world as the *lesser*-than-human world, he forfeited the capacity to discern the destruction and retreat of Earthly marvels. “Men pay for the increase in power with alienation from that over which they exercise power,” Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno incisively observed.⁷ The price of anthropocentrism has been exactly that: as civilized Man’s power over the natural world has grown, so by the same token has

⁶ Debord (2006).

⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno (1972).

his blindness to the wonder of the biosphere's existence as well as to the grievous violence he has unleashed within it. Thus, civilized humanity has kept expanding, and everything annihilated on the way has been deemed losable and forgettable.

A dramatic indicator of our alienation from the natural world today is the public invisibility of the mass extinction that humanity has instigated. This invisibility is testimony to the inability of the dominant human-supremacist regime to collectively countenance and metabolize its own horrors. The penalty of *anthropos* decreeing himself first and foremost has thus not only been the inability to draw a line to his expansionism, but also a loss of sight to any consequences—even one as gigantic as a mass extinction—that could possibly cast a shadow of doubt on his self-proclaimed exultation and forward march.

Yet today there is something new under the sun: A dawning recognition of the need to contain the ill side effects of human expansionism. This need has arisen because the disregard of any limits to economic growth, population increase, industrial food production, energy use, and the spread of human settlements and industrial infrastructure is backfiring against humanity *itself*. The nonstop advance of the human enterprise—hitherto unproblematic in only having consequences for dismissable others—is ramifying in ways that are jeopardizing people and perhaps civilization as a whole: rapid climate change, water shortages, pollution, and resource depletions to mention some high-priority issues for human welfare. A mounting sense of troubles imminent on humanity's horizon is a signal feature of our time.⁸

What is the prevailing response to the discernment of potentially intractable problems? Has it been to probe the anthropocentric worldview that has undergirded and sponsored civilization's limitless expansionism and yielded a world out of balance? Not to date. No mainstream politician, media, or NGO has conceded as problematic the historical legacy of humanity displacing wild nature, reinventing Earth as civilization's stage set, and extinguishing incalculable beings regionally and globally. Instead, the reigning response has been a riff on the received human-supremacist narrative: We are the resourceful race, the technological magicians, the "God species"—and by marshaling our unique strengths, we will resolve the difficulties confronting us. In the wake of confirming, instead of confronting, the human supremacy complex, the standard approach to civilization's challenges is twofold: piecemeal and technological. The piecemeal approach treats problems in isolated and consecutive fashion, rather than as so many symptoms of a lived worldview; while the pitch for technological fixes sustains human exceptionalism by foregrounding humanity's supposed strong suit as the saving grace.

And so we are today barraged by a suite of approaches framed in a compartmentalized and technical register. Shortages of freshwater for agriculture, industry, and urban centers will be tackled via mega-engineering projects such as desalinization or the redirecting of entire rivers or their waters. Diminishing fossil

⁸ It must be added, however, that obliviousness to ecological mayhem is still epidemic. As British environmental journalist George Monbiot wryly notes, people continue to "live as if trapped inside a Sunday supplement: obsessed with fame, fashion and the three dreary staples of middle class conversation: recipes, renovations and resorts. Anything but the topic [of the destruction of Earth's living systems] that demands our attention" (Monbiot 2014).

fuel reserves will be addressed (and are being addressed) by deploying extreme technologies that extract deposits from deep land and seabed sediments, mountain tops, or (previously) forested lands. Down the road, goes the circulating promise, algae, switchgrass, or some other biomass might be repurposed into fuel. Should climate disruption worsen, humanity might turn to the prospect of geoengineering to adjust Earth's thermostat. Food security will be guaranteed by corporate rearrangements of crops' and animals' DNA, so the former can grow on arid, degraded, or flooded lands and the latter made to balloon to bigger "protein" portions. As fisheries become depleted, fish factories can be escalated; as the numbers of ocean fish needed to feed the factory fish run low, perhaps someone will figure out a way to feed fish soymeal. And when jellyfish clog the pipes of nuclear or desalination plants, robotic machines can be deployed to turn them into mush.⁹

The prevalent piecemeal-technological framework to (self-endangering) problems focuses sole attention on, and even invites admiration for, the cleverness of Man in the face of adversity. By the same token, this approach tenaciously upholds Earth as the Planet of the Humans: one, by never allowing that belief to be scrutinized or doubted; and two, by marshaling self-assigned human superior qualities as the ones we can depend on to solve every problem. The steadfast adherence to anthropocentrism is, for the most part, neither conscious decision nor deliberate strategy. Just as the logic of this worldview has swallowed up the world, so it has swallowed up humanity itself. And herein lies the ultimate irony of the anthropocentric worldview: while it wagered on reaping power by elevating civilized humanity as the apex of creation, and turning the world into its oyster, it has so *conditioned* human existence that the possibility of an alternative way of life—abundant in diverse beings and rife in mutual flourishing—is virtually beyond thinkable.

But it is possible and, we submit, necessary to make that alternative way of life thinkable. As many critical thinkers, concerned human beings, and committed activists are realizing, decentering civilized humanity and rejoining Earth's community of life are the vital work of our time. The essays of this special issue endeavor to participate in that work, by unsettling anthropocentrism from a variety of disciplinary and thematic perspectives.

Ronald Simkins challenges a standard interpretation of the Bible as an anthropocentric treatise that has shaped Western dominion over the biosphere and thus been causally implicated in the ecological crisis. Simkins argues that this interpretation is based on a selective reading of Scripture in which particular passages, most notably the first book of Genesis, have been cherry picked and emphasized.¹⁰ He contends that important Biblical passages and books set forth a "theocentric worldview," which challenges the traditional idea of God having granted Man authority to lord over the Creation. The Book of Job, for example,

⁹ Never mind that the explosion of jellyfish numbers is a consequence of the ecological havoc civilized humanity has wreaked in the oceans.

¹⁰ Other renown Biblical commentators, like Wendell Berry and Ellen Bernstein, have also contested the traditional anthropocentric reading of Judeo-Christian Scripture, as imposed upon it rather than flowing from it (Berry 2009; Bernstein 2005).

communicates a more humble perspective. “The divine speeches in Job,” Simkins maintains, “are radically nonanthropocentric: the world is simply not about humans.” Simkins thus offers a fundamentally divergent elucidation of a text so central to Western civilization. Instead of a received view of the Bible as having significantly contributed to guiding human conquest of the natural world, he submits a very different outlook: that its anthropocentric reading was, in fact, an interpretive imposition of an already deeply anthropocentric culture. A nuanced, more holistic approach to Scripture profoundly challenges the anthropocentric dogma that has infected Western Judeo-Christian traditions, “dethroning humans from their artificial (human-made) precipice overlooking the natural world.”

Matthew Calarco’s deconstruction of anthropocentrism begins with a typology of its key characteristics. Anthropocentrism is characterized firstly by a credo of exceptionalism that exalts the human in a standalone category among all life forms. In Western discourses, Calarco emphasizes, recurrent efforts have been directed to theorize “the special place that humans occupy and their exceptional status in various domains.” Anthropocentrism is also distinguished by its binary logic. While binary distinctions are intrinsic to language and perhaps defining of thought, the exceptionalist logic of anthropocentrism hijacks this feature to spawn hierarchies out of dualisms, within which humans are “discovered” to have a “series of traits that belong solely to humans,” while nonhumans are found to be bereft of these traits and thus of inferior stature. Sharp distinctions between humans and nonhumans are commonplace both in the realm of ontology (ideas about being) and in the realm of ethics (ideas about moral consideration). According to Calarco, a strong moral hierarchy deserves special attention because it is essential in defining action orientations: only by giving relative, and often absolute, value to the human over the nonhuman, and by withdrawing moral consideration for the other-than-human realm, can a reign of displacement, exploitation, killing, and relentless use of the natural world (and its multitude of beings) become status quo.

Elaborating his typology further, Calarco offers another significant insight: Historically, anthropocentrism has never placed *all* humans on a par, but “typically it functions to include only a select subset of human beings in the sphere of humanity proper.” Calarco thus calls attention to the fact that the privileging of “the human” has not tracked along species-inclusive lines. Conquests and displacements of *human* others—indigenous and less powerful peoples deemed beneath “humanity proper”—are a straightforward extension of anthropocentric logic (Categories of “subhuman” and “savage” have precisely functioned to excise certain groups from humanity and lump them into the sphere of otherness toward which violence and domination can be exercised.). The last category of Calarco’s typology involves institutional effects—the “discursive and material practices” of anthropocentrism. He highlights the “animal-industrial complex” in which the killing and exploitation of animals constitutes a pervasive and morally invisible aspect of daily life in late modernity.

In his effort to destabilize the anthropocentric regime, Calarco calls on the ruminations of philosopher Frederick Nietzsche and environmental thinker Val Plumwood. The central challenge he poses through his exegeses of Nietzsche and Plumwood is the following: “What possibilities of thought and life open beyond

anthropocentrism”? An ignited human desire to live in the open within a diverse world—“so overrich in what is beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine”—brings into view the radical stance of what Calarco coins as “indistinction”: A profound zone of non-hierarchy within which the fullness of being on Earth can be realized and experienced.

Indeed, Deborah Bird Rose’s paper on Aboriginal life might be read as an exploration of an *achievement* of indistinction. She reminds us that a non-hierarchical stance has often characterized indigenous cultures; not all humans have inhabited places according to the asymmetrical binaries modern civilized humans are familiar with. Her paper describes Aboriginal life in Australia’s desert interior as a “poetics of fit.” Instead of inviting tropes of hardship, overcoming, and conquest—as it might within a Western mindset—a region defying easy inhabitation called forth “love and commitment” on the part of its first human inhabitants. This standpoint rested on the people’s recognition of the land and all its beings as forming dynamic and holistic patterns within which their own life was designed to flow. “The desert,” Rose writes, “was and is known, navigated, storied and inhabited [by Aboriginal people] to an extent that westerners find hard to comprehend.” In her narrative, we can discern a profound level of human mastery of (instead of over) the world, stemming from a web of close observation, deep respect, “Dreaming” storylines, and multi-species kinships—that is, from *following* not dominating. Among the patterns that the first people followed, central was the Rain (also a major Dreaming) and its arrivals transforming the desert into a blooming, singing, bursting-with-life landscape. The indigenous people, Rose tells us, lived by “chasing water,” by a poetics of belonging and mobility, according to the dictates of water’s comings and departures.

Thus, the indigenous human is not so much decentered, as in the Center along with everyone and everything else—animals, other people, plants, moving wetlands, and wildly different seasons all shaped by place-based ecologies. Rose describes a place-centered perspective, and the masterful way of life that flows from it. Why call this *mastery*, and thus allude to it as power? To disrupt its received conception as domination, manipulation, or control, through which others are compelled to fit within human-supremacist agendas of use and exploitation. The power of Aboriginal life was sourced from harnessing, deferring to, obeying, and moving with the vast forces attending a universe of life. But when humanity places itself outside and above the natural world, its constructed distinction and artificial perch offer the illusion of superiority and a transient experience of “wealth” at the expense of others, while what is sacrificed is the very source from which true power flows as abundance, creativity, unexpectedness, reciprocity, and mutual flourishing. “Indigenous philosophical ecologies,” to use Rose’s phrase, embody an ethos of restraint which not only lets be the natural world’s creative rhythms but also draws from those rhythms for the expression cultural creativity. During times of drought, Rose narrates, when the desert was not visited, songs were sung, stories told, and memories relived. Thus did the desert’s diverse ways materially and spiritually enrich the first people.

Such holism is largely lost to a culture that has displaced the wild to the periphery and built a humanized world which today is technologically mediated and dominated by the digital screen. As environmental philosopher Jack Turner put it in

a recent interview, “nowadays very few people directly experience voles, coral reefs, redwoods, and whales. You can live in San Francisco, ride a Google bus to work, stare at a screen, stare at a screen, repeat, repeat, repeat.”¹¹ Turner asked his students how much time they spend outdoors and how much in front of a screen: An average of 10 min versus 8–10 h was the unsurprising response. In his work on “semiotic capitalism,” critical theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi notes that working in front of a screen is virtually everyone’s lot today—wherein not only physical labor is placed at capital’s service, but also the soul’s creative energies.¹² Indeed, digital life has spread beyond the spheres of work and entertainment into the communicative lifeworld itself: From a critical theory perspective, the various and sundry “Facebook” phenomena represent semiotic capitalism’s colonization of friendship and social interaction. An antidote to screen-mediated existence and relationship is offered by Lissy Goralnik and Michael Nelson’s paper in this volume.

Goralnik and Nelson describe the design and experience of an outdoor environmental pedagogy which they call “field philosophy.” Their course expands education beyond the classroom and computer-mediated settings to immersion learning in natural, quasi-wild environments. How can such learning be transformative? They argue that it can shift students away from formulaic dualisms (including sterile juxtapositions of “anthropocentrism” vs. “biocentrism”) into a richer intellectual and emotional space of more complex understandings. Field philosophy enlarges the scope of learning beyond reading and textual analyses, by valorizing place-based understandings of environmental issues and conflicts. Such a curriculum is enriching in engaging senses, emotions, experiential insights, and relational fields of students, teachers, and people encountered in the outdoor settings. Immersion in the natural world, they argue, provides the opportunity to transcend half-baked dualistic ideas, grapple with complexity, experience real value conflicts, and develop an ethic of care for a broader and actually encountered community of humans and nonhumans. In the authors’ words, field philosophy can “catalyze a metaphysical shift toward a more inclusive environmental ethics.” One of the chief dangers of our time is that wilderness itself and communion with it will continue to recede. Since lack of contact with wild nature often translates into a lack of care for its fate, Goralnik and Nelson’s pedagogical initiative offers an antidote that will hopefully inspire similar curricular innovations around the world.

We close this special issue with David Kidner’s contribution in which the face value assumption of anthropocentrism—that it constitutes a perspective that *serves* human interests—is radically challenged. “Anthropocentrism,” Kidner contends, is not anthropocentric. He traces the roots of what is considered anthropocentric thinking—especially the belief that “all forms of life exist to serve us”—in a reductive technological-economic order that gained ascendancy in early modernity and has culminated in the industrial system of our time. This system has colonized human consciousness just as surely as it has colonized the natural world; as Kidner puts it, within it both “humanity and nature are being dissolved.” Far from being beneficiaries of an order that displaces embodied forms of awareness, reduces value

¹¹ Turner (2014).

¹² Berardi (2009).

to money, and approaches problems through technological management, human beings are *unknowing* perpetrators of that order—unknowing in the sense of being unable to escape their conditioning by its symbolic and material dimensions. Echoing critical theory themes, Kidner argues that the domination of nature and the domination of human consciousness are simultaneous and deeply entangled. “Just as the nuances of human awareness are replaced by the rational calculations of the economist and the marketing executive so the intricate interactions of tropical forests are replaced by the ecological sterility of palm oil plantations.” Kidner submits that when we blame the ecological crisis on anthropocentrism we are implicitly stating that nature’s destruction serves human interests. Deeper investigation into the historical roots of the technological-economic order, however, discloses that human interests are not at all being served, but that what is occurring is “an unthinkable human subservience to a greater power”—today the industrial symbolic and material template. And thus, at the core of the domination of nature lies profound *human* unfreedom, our collective consciousness taken hostage by the same forces that are destroying and revamping the biosphere.

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