



The Great Decoupling: Why Minimizing Humanity's Dependence on the Environment May Not Be Cause for Celebration

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Abstract

Characterizations of the Anthropocene often indicate both the challenges that our new epoch poses for human well-being and a sense of loss that comes from a compromised environment. In this paper I explore a deeper problem underpinning both issues, namely, that decoupling humanity from the world with which we are familiar compromises human flourishing. The environmental conditions characteristic of the Anthropocene do so, I claim, by compromising flourishing on two fronts. First, the comparatively novel conditions of the Anthropocene risk rupturing our narratives, putting at risk our sense of self and connections to familiar environments. Second, by undermining the connections between our environmental background and the sense of well-being conditioned by that background our ability to exercise options that constitute a recognizable good life are compromised. This paper argues that to the extent humanity is decoupled from their environments humans are not only less able to access opportunities our understanding of who we are, our identities, and our capacity to make sense of the world around us through those identities is compromised. I conclude that the Anthropocene does more than challenge our ability to utilize resources, it challenges our understanding of who we are in the world.

Keywords Anthropocene · Flourishing · Narrative · Capabilities · Decoupling · Place

“At this stage [...] we are still largely treading on terra incognita.” – Paul Crutzen.

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Terra Incognita: Our Unfamiliar World

Through the rapid changes indicative of the Anthropocene, our environments are becoming decreasingly familiar, decreasingly like the conditions in which modern human society developed. In 2011 report on climate adaptation the U.S. National Research Council concluded that while “Adaptation to climate variability is nothing new to humanity, [...] it now seems very likely that climate conditions by the later part of the 21st Century will move outside the range of past human experience.” (National Research Council 2011, p. 17) In the intervening years, this has only become more apparent. As global change takes place humanity faces conditions decreasingly like those under which we have learned to flourish and through which we have come to understand ourselves.

In this paper I will argue that one of the great challenges faced in the Anthropocene is the decoupling of humanity from the ecological systems with which we are familiar, on which we depend, and through which we understand ourselves. Many have pointed to the way the instabilities indicative of the Anthropocene compromise human flourishing through undermining the ecological systems on which we depend (IPCC 2014) and the capabilities, those substantial freedoms “we value and have reason to value” (Alkire 2010, p. 195) and through which we live meaningful, flourishing lives that are supported by those ecological systems. Others have suggested that the Anthropocene compromises our narratives (Shockley 2014; Lear 2008; Schlosberg 2012b), the way we understand ourselves in terms of our familiar surrounding environments (e.g., through historically familiar patterns of rainfall and agriculture and cultural engagement). We can see, for example, both of these problems in the ever-growing tragedy of climate refugees (Brzoska and Fröhlich 2016; Cai et al. 2016; Gendreau 2017). However, the interplay between our capabilities—which I will take for the purposes of this paper to be requisite for flourishing—and narratives has not been fully investigated. In an unfamiliar world nature may seem less like the source of flourishing, and more like a constraint on flourishing.

This paper explores how the decoupling of humans from their surrounding environments compromises our ability to access and actualize our opportunities for flourishing. The changes indicative of the Anthropocene represent an environment that is less familiar and so less accessible to our efforts at flourishing. In this way the Anthropocene undermines flourishing by simultaneously rupturing our narratives and compromising our capabilities. This undermining is to a large extent our own making. As Amitav Ghosh puts it in the *The Great Derangement*, the strangely unimaginable world we now inhabit is “the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms” (Ghosh 2016, p. 32). The breaks in our narratives that make the world so unimaginable to Ghosh seem to reflect a strange separation from the nonhuman world. While it may be that we learn to flourish in new ways in such a world—such flourishing is the legacy of many groups and cultures that have learned to flourish through the need to adapt to a changed world (Lear 2008; Whyte 2013)—current forms of flourishing will be undermined. Despite the fact that never before have humans had such an impact on

the nonhuman world, the legacy of the Anthropocene may well be a new kind of separation between humans and the nonhuman world, a separation that might well make nature appear to be foreign, and in a position to strike back. While never before has humankind been more an author of the world around us (Ellis 2015), never before has nature so seemed to be pushing back.

After characterizing the Anthropocene and the instability it represents, I will introduce what I call the Great Decoupling—the disassociation of humanity from the conditions and places in which modern social humans have come to be. I will then briefly describe the capabilities approach to flourishing. While not a substantive account of flourishing, the capabilities framework will help provide background for just how we should understand the challenges posed by the instability of the Anthropocene. While I will not defend the capabilities approach here (see Shockley 2014), relying on this approach will enable the description of two important and related challenges posed by the Great Decoupling. First, as it is more difficult to access the capabilities necessary for flourishing in an unfamiliar world, decoupling causes separation between the capabilities that have enabled flourishing in the past and the opportunities and available options we face in a world notably divergent from the past. We will see that this separation of those capabilities ostensibly available to us from those to which we have real access is a manifestation of the difficulty in making connections with and understanding our less familiar world. While there are many examples of groups that have adapted to changing environments, making clear that adapting to and flourishing in an unfamiliar world is not *impossible*, it takes more effort to adapt to such a world. In an unfamiliar world, individuals are less cognizant of opportunities and options for flourishing. Our capacity to flourish is thereby compromised. Second, decoupling causes ruptures in our narratives, the ways we understand ourselves and relate to the world around us, thereby challenging our sense of who we are, and how we understand ourselves with respect to one another and our surrounding environment. While these ruptures are not new to the Anthropocene, the scale, scope and pervasiveness of the ruptures expected in our new epoch are. I will argue that these two challenges are interdependent. Ruptures in narrative, caused by changes to the background conditions through which we partly understand ourselves and one another, make it difficult to access the opportunities and possibilities that, in part, constitute human flourishing. I will conclude by reconsidering the form and nature of the challenges the Great Decoupling poses for humans.

Before we proceed, we should note that the Great Decoupling that is the focus of this paper should not be conflated with the notion of “decoupling,” common in climate policy circles, focused on the desirable break between economic growth and greenhouse gas emissions. *Emissions* decoupling provides the possibility that we could have economic development without the increased greenhouse gas emissions from the increased energy use associated with economic development. This break seems to be occurring, and seems to warrant celebration (Werber and Karaian 2016; Aiden 2016). If nations can develop their infrastructure and better provide for their citizen’s well-being without increasing greenhouse gas emissions, many of the thorny problems involving the justice of climate change will become much less acute (Dilling et al. 2015). While I will not explore emissions decoupling in any

detail (see Stavins 2016 for an excellent informal discussion), the separation of emissions from development may be a good thing only insofar as it is not indicative of a more general decoupling, what I have called the Great Decoupling. Societies arise in particular ecological contexts, and their ability to flourish in new environmental contexts is not assured; minimizing a society's dependence on its ecological context may not warrant celebration.

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is best characterized as a world that is stratigraphically and functionally distinct from the Holocene era, the era in which human society and culture evolved (Waters et al. 2016). As Earle Ellis describes our new era,

We live in the Anthropocene, a new period of Earth's history defined by human influences so profound and pervasive that they are writing a new global record in rock. Humanity has emerged as a global force of nature. The earth will never be the same. (Ellis 2015, p. 24; see also Steffen et al. 2007a, b; Ellis 2011; Steffen et al. 2011).¹

We face comparatively novel terrain (Hobbs et al. 2013). As Crutzen writes, "At this stage [...] we are still largely treading on *terra incognita*." (2002, p. 23)

Of course the world is not *entirely* new. Basic biological, ecological and geological processes remain unchanged. Yet the "boundary conditions" that provide for agriculture, fishing zones, and cultural connections to particular ecological circumstances, conditions that "have been stable for much longer than the histories of those institutions that have allowed human beings to become the dominant species on the earth" (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 218), are now, in the Anthropocene, no longer so stable (IPCC 2014; Melillo et al. 2014; NRC 2011). Some of the challenges faced by humanity are predictable and well studied (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; Rockström et al. 2009; IPCC 2014). Agricultural zones will shift or change substantially, there will be increasing disconnect between animal species and the ecological systems in which they had resided. The fishing communities of Indonesia, like those of the US Northeast, communities whose identities are shaped by fishing, will have to become something else if there are no fish to catch. Members of those communities will have to find new ways to be who they are without their familiar ecological circumstances, and the cultural practices that bound them to those ecological circumstances. More

¹ Ellis reacts to this new era not with shock or horror, or with a call to humility, but rather with an optimistic call for human ingenuity,

To embrace the Anthropocene, we must stop imagining ourselves nurtured by a nonhuman nature and accept the reality that it is only by transforming nature that we survive and thrive. The fate of both humanity and nonhuman nature does not depend on sustaining natural ecosystems but on the most proactive human reshaping of nature ever in history. (Ellis 2015, p. 27)

This paper will take a distinctively less Pollyannaish approach to the novel challenges humans will most undoubtedly face in the Anthropocene.

generally, we cannot rely on past practices being sufficient to guide our future actions, or to ensure our continued well-being (Dilling et al. 2015).

While there are many forms instability might take, the increased frequency and unpredictability of extreme events due to climate change constitutes one salient example of environmental instability, one we can expect to be part of the new normal (IPCC 2012; NRC 2011). In a telling example, taken from his past, Amitav Ghosh describes a tornado that passed through Dehli, where he was living at the time, the first such tornado ever seen (Ghosh 2016, pp. 12–13). The eye of the tornado passed directly over him, leaving a notable impression. The novelty of the event, and the difficulty of even describing such an event, indicated the new normal it represented. Indeed, Ghosh worries, and recent science has pointed out, that changing climatic conditions will lead to new, comparatively novel weather patterns. These patterns will make unfamiliar what, due to generations of stable weather patterns, had been familiar. As Ghosh notes, “The incredulity that [...] associations [of ideas of moderation and stability with nature] evoke today is a sign of the degree to which the Anthropocene has already disrupted many assumptions that were founded on the relative climatic stability of the Holocene” (Ghosh 2016, p. 21). The instability of our current world undermines our fit with that world, and thereby leads to the sense that humanity has become decoupled.

For those affected by these changes, the conditions seem foreign, even unimaginable. Habitats may well be fractured. Systems that had been coupled may not be as well coupled in the future. Humanity may not *fit* as well to our ecological background environment as we had in the past. And these background features may not always be as explicit as, for example, shifting or declining fisheries (Hughes 2012; Bale 2016). The background features so central to our flourishing may also include a richly historical sense of *place* (Drenthen 2009, 2016; Higgs 2003; Holland 2008, 2012; Holland and O’Neill 2003; Hourdequin 2015; Norton and Hannon 1997; Schlosberg 2012a, b). As we can see in many communities no longer able to maintain their identity (e.g., fishing communities no longer able to fish), making sense of *who* we are involves understanding *where* we are. As Ghosh describes the significance of place, “to leave the places that are linked to our memories and attachments, to abandon the homes that have given our lives roots, stability, and meaning, is nothing short of unthinkable.” (2016, p. 54) Place is at the root of a people’s connection to their surroundings, even as those surroundings change; a place is “linked to its inhabitants through a dense web of mutual sustenance and symbolism” (ibid., 62). Recognizing the significance of place requires rethinking what is needed for human flourishing. We must think beyond material resources. One alternative would be to think in terms of flourishing in terms of the opportunities made available for flourishing, and the ways those opportunities might be enhanced or undermined in the Anthropocene.

Along these lines Amartya Sen has developed an approach to human flourishing that encourages us to think of flourishing not in terms of resources or happiness or our current states of well-being, but what *capabilities* we have. As Sen puts it, when we consider what it takes to flourish,

account would have to be taken not only of ... [the] goods the persons respectively hold, but also of the relevant personal characteristics that govern the *conversion* of primary goods into the person's ability to promote her ends. (Sen, 2000, p. 74)

Following this approach, we should focus our understanding of flourishing on the “real opportunities or freedoms” (Crocker and Robeyns 2010, p. 63) required for individuals to pursue a form of the good life that they can endorse, that is, a form of the good life that is *accessible* not only materially, but also cognitively and personally. As David Crocker and Ingrid Robeyns describe the view,

The capability approach ... asks whether people are able to be healthy, and whether the means or resources necessary for this capability, such as clean water, adequate sanitation, access to doctors, protection from infections and diseases, and basic knowledge on health issues, are present. It asks whether people are well-nourished, and whether the conditions for the realization of this capability, such as having sufficient food supplies and food entitlements, are being met. It asks whether people have access to a high-quality educational system, to real political participation, and to community activities that support them, that enable to cope with struggles in daily life, and that foster real friendships. (2010, p. 64)

If they are to be capabilities, opportunities must be *live* choices one might take. The capabilities approach indicates that we should focus on those opportunities to which we have access and which when chosen constitute a form of the good life that we would choose or endorse.

One of the great challenges faced by humanity in the Anthropocene is to make sense of what it is to flourish in a world that—even if of our own (largely unintentional) making—is largely unfamiliar. Under those conditions, it is difficult to imagine what it would be to flourish and so a more substantive account of flourishing is unavailable (we can see anticipations of this in Ghosh (2016)). The capabilities approach is intended not to provide a substantive approach, but rather a framework for generating substantive accounts. In the face of an unfamiliar world, where a substantive account of flourishing is not on the offer, we would do well to examine the conditions for the possibility of flourishing.

One vital condition made apparent by the capabilities approach, a condition that will have to be satisfied for any substantive account of flourishing, is that we are able to make connections, both in terms of resources and opportunity, across the transition between our historical relationship to the environment and our uncertain future. As an era characterizing a period of comparative ecological instability and representing a substantive break from our historical relationship with the environment, the Anthropocene poses a challenge for human flourishing not merely in the obvious sense that our material and institutional resources may be compromised but in the sense that the decreased familiarity of our environment represents a decreased ability to access the opportunities that constitute flourishing. The Great Decoupling presents humanity with a challenge to make connections to our changing world.

Of course, humans adaptation to these sorts of changes is as old as migration and environmental change. Yet, as a species, at a global level, this is new. The changes we currently face constitute a global break in the symmetry between human adaptation and our surrounding environment, to the extent that we have caused this break by comprising our own environments. As Chakrabarty (2009) intimates, there is something existentially troubling about this new evolving relationship between humanity as a whole and our environmental context. With a decoupling of humanity from our environmental backgrounds, with the separation created by the sense of unfamiliarity indicated by that decoupling, we have less access to the opportunities provided by our environmental background. Nature may seem foreign, even oppositional, as a constraint rather than a source of our flourishing. We might think of this as a version of nature striking back: the lack of familiarity presents challenges for flourishing, and a more unfamiliar nature may feel like the cause of these challenges. At the global level, this is a comparatively new phenomenon. While humans are capable of adapting to substantial changes in their environment, a broad, global sense of nature being unfamiliar is novel. This novelty can pose a challenge for our flourishing, not only in the clear physical ways expressed by the environmental upheavals of climate change (IPCC 2012), but also in the more existential forms made apparent by ruptures in our narratives.

Narratives at Risk: Understanding Ourselves in an Unfamiliar World

In the prologue to her classic, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt recalls the strange public reaction to the 1957 launch of Sputnik. There was celebration that man had at last thrown off the shackles of Earth.

The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first 'step towards escape from men's imprisonment to the earth.' And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia's great scientists: 'Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever.' (Arendt 1958, p. 1)

This is a striking reaction for, as Arendt notes, "[t]he earth is the very quintessence of the human condition." (Arendt 1958, p. 2) Arendt was troubled about celebrating a separation from the Earth that made us who we are, served as the basis for all we know, and constituted the foundation for our contemporary social world; she was troubled by the alienation that such a separation represents. She worried that this separation challenges our understanding of what it is to be human, particularly as in the modern era it seems much of human activity is focused on insulating itself from its surroundings. And this insulation is clearly a form of dissociation. Now, in the early 21st century, as much as for Arendt in the mid-19th century, making sense of this dissociation and its consequences requires more than acknowledging the break between our sense of self and the world, on the one hand, and the capabilities that enable flourishing and the world, on the other. It requires seeing that these breaks,

both narrative ruptures and inaccessible opportunities, are part of the same Great Decoupling that is increasingly a part of life in the Anthropocene.

Consequently, the Great Decoupling should not be thought of as an expression of human freedom and power but rather *a loss of mooring*. The dissociation of the capabilities constitutive of our flourishing from our destabilized environment constitutes a challenge, a way our compromised nature might “strike back.” A destabilized environment will seem foreign, even oppositional, to how we understand ourselves and our opportunities for flourishing. In a destabilized environment, modes of flourishing are less accessible, our self-understanding is compromised, and the various interconnections we have with our environments are more tenuous. The different interconnections we have with the world, interconnections that are compromised by the Great Decoupling, can be seen in the different ways the environment *matters*. As O’Neill et al. (2008, pp. 1–4) put it, humans live *from* the world (in the sense that we, as humans, rely on the world for resources), *in* the world (in the sense that the world provides places and a sense of home), and *with* the world (in the sense that the world possesses things we value intrinsically, not merely as they play a role in our lives). Their point is that our relation to the natural environment is not characterized completely by its role as a resource (the sense in which we live “from” the environment) or by the value we place (or find) in our surrounding environment as the familiar place in which we live, (the sense in which we live “in” the environment), but also the way in which we coevolve with the environment, the way we interact with the environment both contemporarily and historically (the sense in which we live “with” the environment). We understand ourselves in various contexts, with various familiar features, and from reliance resources. Together these frames express the central role the environment plays in the narratives we tell to ourselves and to one another. This tripartite framing provides a constructive means of characterizing the complex set of concerns that arise through the decoupling from the environments in which we find ourselves situated. Our narratives, our modes of self-understanding, blend our reliance on resources, our sense of place, and our familiar environment. The world shapes our narratives. And these narratives are important. As William Cronon puts it,

Stories are the indispensable tools that we human being use for making sense of the world and our own lives. They articulate our deepest values and provide the fables on which we rely as we confront moral dilemmas and make choices about our every action ...[S]tories provide the interpretive compass with which we navigate our lives. (Cronon 2002, pp. 87-88).

Narrative provides a means of characterizing understanding who we are as individuals and as groups with shared understandings of the world. Connecting these shared understandings to our past is vital to maintaining their significance. Relying on these shared understandings to make sense of how we as individuals fit into that past, and might play a role in the future, is similarly vital (Chakrabary 2009, p. 220). As O’Neill et al. put the point, “we make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. Environments matter because they embody that larger context” (2008, p. 198). Our narratives allow us to situate ourselves in a world, a world that makes

sense because of a recognizable past (and where we find ourselves situated from, in, and with our environments). Radical deviations from past experience without some context to frame our current situations compromise our ability to understand ourselves. Decoupling us from our destabilized environmental background, such deviations can lead to ruptures in our narratives.

Jonathan Lear (2008) reminds us of the importance of narrative and background environment to human flourishing through his recounting of the thoughts of Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation, someone who endured catastrophic threats to the stability of his own society and a remarkable, if less global, version of decoupling. Near the end of the 19th century, Chief Plenty Coups saw the destruction of the Buffalo, and with the loss of the Buffalo the destruction of the background against which his people could understand themselves and the world in which they lived. Chief Plenty Coups described the loss of the buffalo to his biographer, Frank Linderman, in striking terms: “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not life them up. After this nothing happened” (Lear 2008, p. 2). Of course, in one sense, a good deal happened after the buffalo went away, not much of it good for the Crow people. Chief Plenty Coups’ point was, rather, that the catastrophe associated with the loss of the buffalo was not merely about the destruction of a material resource; it was about the sense in which the Crow people understood the world, *their* world, in terms of buffalo. Without the buffalo the Crow didn’t have the cultural bearings to understand their world in recognizable ways. It was not clear how they could flourish in such a world, while still remaining Crow, at least as they could *imagine* what it was to be Crow. Perhaps the closest comparison in the modern affluent, Euro-American context, sadly, would be if suddenly credit transactions became impossible. Not only would this mean the end of the usual methods of accomplishing very basic commercial actions, the physical structure of cities, the nature of commercial transactions, and even our notion of “work” might well become unhinged. A vital, in some cases identity-forming mode of interacting with the world would be gone. Without certain cultural fixtures, there would be nothing stable on which to get ones bearings and make sense of the world. A new relationship to that world would have to be developed. Without the buffalo, the Crow lost the stability necessary to make sense of themselves in their rapidly changing environment. They found themselves separated from their familiar environments, in a seemingly foreign, even hostile world. Their sense of place had been compromised, their narratives ruptured, their capabilities compromised. Opportunities for flourishing that had been available were no longer available. As Lear makes clear, the situation of humanity as a whole is now distressingly similar.

As the case of Chief Plenty Coups and the Crow makes clear, decoupling humans from their environmental background is highly problematic, anticipated by the way we live from, in, and with the environment. In decoupling humans from their natural environments, we find ourselves dissociated from our traditional resource set. As we saw in the previous section, shifting ecologies, whether in terms of fisheries, farming, agriculture, or simply where they live, will provide stress on human well-being. Our resources are less accessible to us, even if they are plentiful, when we are not familiar with them. And, compounding the challenges of the Great Decoupling,

there is good reason to think that in a time of changing climate, resources will be less plentiful (IPCC 2014; Rockström et al. 2009). Decoupling risks making the world as foreign to us as a world without buffalo was to the Crow. This is not to say that the Crow could not flourish in their new environment, or that we cannot flourish in such our rapidly changing world. The Crow could learn to flourish in their new environment. Such changes might on occasion even inspire new forms of flourishing. But flourishing in novel circumstances requires that we find a way to make something that is unfamiliar familiar, and this effort comes with a cost.

As we find ourselves less well linked to the world in which we coevolved, we are less able to see ourselves as part of the world with which we are familiar, and this requires a shift toward the unknown. While there may be some gains that result from such a reconstruction of the self, there is a cost not merely in terms of understanding ourselves, but in relating to others in a shared context (conjoining the sense in which we both live in and with the natural world). Narratives become less about *our* story, and more a story we observe (Chakrabarty 2009).² We become separated from our environments, and our narratives themselves may well seem foreign to us. This is the Great Decoupling. And it puts us in a position where we find ourselves seemingly opposed not only to who we understood ourselves to be, but to the environments that allowed us to make sense of ourselves. As we saw in the case of Chief Plenty Coups, this is a substantial concern. For it tells us that nothing less than our identity is at stake. The Great Decoupling puts pressure on our identities and our sense of place, in a manner disturbingly similar to the pressure put on the Crow with the loss of the buffalo. Humanity as a whole now risks a similar narrative rupture.

Flourishing in Unfamiliar Terrain

The severity of the challenge posed by the Anthropocene can be seen in the interdependence of the two threats to human flourishing described above: *identity* (narrative self-understanding) and *flourishing* (manifesting capabilities). Who we are, our identity, how we understand what it is to flourish, is partly characterized by our narratives, by the stories we tell of who we are and how we make sense of the world around us. If we understand flourishing to require capabilities, forms of life valued by and valuable to those who value them (Crocker and Robeyns 2010, p. 75), both cognitive and material access is required. This access requires familiarity. The separation that results from a rapidly changing environment leads to this lack of familiarity. We see this lack of familiarity through ruptures in our narratives, sometimes to the point of our own narratives appearing unfamiliar.

As the world around us becomes less stable and correspondingly less recognizable we will have difficulties accessing the opportunities available to us. Just as being new to an ecological region will limit one's ability to actualize a garden, until one learns what possibilities are available, one's ability to actualize capabilities will be compromised. New agricultural options, political connections, institutional realities, and environmental hazards will make navigating a new

² I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

landscape more difficult; our ability to adapt will be challenged. Moreover, just as for the Crow, so for us: as we work our way through our evolving landscape our ability to adapt to our environmental surroundings—to match who we are with the place we are in—will be compromised. As the Great Decoupling undermines connections between the capabilities had historically and our future options, flourishing becomes more difficult. However we understand the good, flourishing life, we will be faced with an inability to access possibilities to pursue that life. This is what the capabilities approach makes clear. A loss of available opportunities through a loss of familiarity puts pressure on our capacity to flourish. Of course humans are adaptable, and, as nature responds to the stresses humanity has presented it with, we will adapt as best we can. We can develop our narratives in ways that make sense of narrative rupture, that allow us to make new ways to flourish in our changing world. But it will be more challenging to flourish in an unfamiliar world. This is why Chief Plenty Coup could only have a hope that his people could flourish. Anything more than hope would require that he understand what it would be to flourish as a Crow in a world unfamiliar to the Crow.

In this paper I have argued that the instability characteristic of the Anthropocene compromises flourishing on two interrelated fronts. We saw that the instabilities caused by climate change and other harbingers of the Anthropocene compromise the environmental foundations of our capabilities, and so undermined the options available to us that enable flourishing. We saw that the form of instability characteristic of the Anthropocene compromises our narratives. Our sense of self and sense of place will be stressed insofar as the places to which we have been historically connected are changed by the conditions of the Anthropocene. And we saw that these two concerns were interdependent as our connections to places and environmental conditions, expressed through our narratives, make available to us opportunities without which our capabilities would be compromised. Our capabilities depend on our ability to make sense of opportunities as live options for human flourishing; live options are typically familiar options.

I have attempted to refocus the discussion of the Anthropocene on the coupling between humanity and the environment with which we have developed, on which we depend, and in which we have flourished—as we live from, in, and with the world. The means for our existence, the foundation of our homes and familiar places, and the source of our histories and lives are interconnected with the world; we share narratives with one another and with our surrounding environments. Implicit in this relationship is the dependence we have on our background environmental conditions, a dependence not merely in terms of material resource but in terms of identity and narrative expression. That dependence may vary tremendously over time and be mitigated to some extent by technological power, but it remains nonetheless. One of the great challenges we face in the Anthropocene is that we find our environments increasingly foreign, unfamiliar, and separate. The separation represented by the Great Decoupling compromises that dependence.

What is important for flourishing in the Anthropocene in the face of the Great Decoupling is that we are able to make connections, both in terms of narrative and opportunity, across the transition between our historical relationship to the environment and our uncertain future. As Kyle Whyte has put it, we should strive

for “cultural continuity” rather than fixing our cultural norms on some nostalgic point in the past; we should focus on “a community’s capacity to be adaptive in ways sufficient for the livelihoods of its members to flourish into the future” (Whyte 2013, p. 518). Our efforts to flourish, and to develop prospects for flourishing should then be focused on maintaining some level of continuity with our past and connectivity with our environments, whether those be familiar environments or environments with which we strive to become familiar. This is not to endorse a radical conservatism: humanity is adaptive and has clearly demonstrated the capacity to grow and flourish through drastically changing circumstances. But such growth and change typically comes as a result of challenge, or some minor decoupling of our present circumstance from the familiar features of our past. What we face now is a Great Decoupling, a rupture of narrative and opportunity at the global scale, a rupture affecting humanity as a whole. Let us hope we rise to the challenge, and see our predicament less as nature striking back, and more as humanity catching up.

In a time of global environmental change we should manage our narrative ruptures as much as we manage our adaption to that changing world. As the world grows increasingly unstable, we should focus on continuity (in our narratives) and connectivity (between our capabilities and the environments in which we find ourselves) in our adaptation strategies. Decoupling from the environment poses an extraordinary challenge. Our understanding of what it is to flourish in the Anthropocene should reflect that reality.

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