

# Anthropocene

Jamie Draper

Nuffield College, University of Oxford

[jamie.draper@nuffield.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jamie.draper@nuffield.ox.ac.uk)

*Accepted for publication in The International Encyclopedia of Ethics, please cite the published version.*

The ‘Anthropocene’ is a term used to mark a period in history where humans have become the dominant force in the transformation of the Earth system. It has entered our lexicon through the geological sciences, where it has been proposed as a new geological epoch following the Holocene, a period of relative stability lasting roughly the last 12,000 years (Crutzen 2002). Today, humans are fundamentally altering the Earth system through anthropogenic climate change, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, mass extinction, environmental degradation, and more. Many of these impacts are potentially catastrophic for the human and natural systems on Earth, in that they threaten to exceed the ‘planetary boundaries’ (Röckstrom et al. 2009) or to cross ‘tipping points’ (Lenton et al. 2008) in the Earth system. The concept of the Anthropocene has been used as an *ethical* and *critical* concept to explore the implications of the idea that humans are the dominant force in the transformation of the Earth system. This entry examines three sites of critical reflection: (1) the Anthropocene as a diagnosis and prognosis, (2) ethics and politics in the Anthropocene, and (3) the Anthropocene and the ‘End of Nature’.

## 1. The Anthropocene as Diagnosis and Prognosis

The concept of the Anthropocene is often employed as a diagnosis and/or prognosis of our current predicament: a moment of overlapping and interconnected ecological crises. The Anthropocene has been used as a critical concept (*see* CRITICAL THEORY) for understanding those ecological crises. It is used both a *diagnostic* tool for identifying the pathologies that has generated such crises, and as a *prognostic* tool for envisaging future scenarios in which we succumb to or overcome such crises.

As a diagnosis, the Anthropocene identifies the root of the overlapping ecological crises that we face in the development of the technological, social and productive powers of human societies. The idea is that as human societies have developed, our powers have developed to such a degree that we are profoundly altering—and threatening—the environmental background conditions that we have always taken for granted: that “humankind has begun to play dice with the planet, without knowing the rules of the game” (McNeill 2000). In philosophy and other forms of humanistic inquiry, scholars have reflected on what this diagnosis means for our established frameworks for understanding history (Chakrabarty 2009), the place of the human in the natural environment (Chernilo 2016), and judgements of progress (Moellendorf 2017).

Critics of the concept of the Anthropocene have argued that it misdiagnoses the source of our ecological predicament. The main complaint is that the concept of the Anthropocene is too blunt a

conceptual tool, in that it lays the blame at the door of an undifferentiated ‘humanity’ (Di Chiro 2016; cf. Sharp 2020). Some critics argue that the roots of the ecological crises that we face can be located more specifically within European colonialism (Lightfoot et al. 2018) or the development of the capitalist economic order (Malm and Hornborg 2014; Malm 2016). Others point out that the concept of the Anthropocene obscures the fact that many Indigenous communities have already been suffering through ecological crises generated through settler-colonialism (Powys Whyte 2018) or point out that it presumes a “universalised masculine position” (Walton 2020: 116; *see* ECOFEMINISM). A range of alternative terms have been proposed, including the ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore 2017, 2018) and ‘Plantationocene’ (Haraway 2015).

As a prognosis, the concept of the Anthropocene is used to envisage possible futures. Darrel Moellendorf (forthcoming) has distinguished three interpretations of the Anthropocene: the *Misanthropocene*, and the *Arcadian* and *Promethean* interpretations. In the *Misanthropocene*, humanity’s collective failure to avert the ecological threats that it has wrought leads a disastrous collapse of ecological systems. In the *Arcadian* interpretation, changes in social attitudes lead us to a more harmonious relationship with nature, where we limit our interventions and act as nature’s stewards (see Anderson 2005). Moellendorf worries that this vision is unrealistic, and moreover that it ignores the benefits of that we can reap from exploiting nature, such as alleviating poverty. In the alternative that he favours—the *promethean* interpretation—prosperity creation, technological innovation and international cooperation lead to a future in which human rationality succeeds in overcoming the ecological crises that we face. The *promethean* vision is a vision of a “good Anthropocene” (Ellis 2011; Ackerman 2014) in which human societies take up the mantle of the great moral challenge they have brought upon themselves. Critics of these more optimistic visions of the Anthropocene argue that their proponents adopt the very same “ecological modernist” perspective that has brought us to a moment of ecological crisis in the first place (Crist 2013; Hamilton 2016; Fremaux and Barry 2019; cf. Dalby 2015).

## **2. Ethics and Politics in the Anthropocene**

Some of our central ethical concepts appear to be inadequate when confronted with the challenges of the Anthropocene. Dale Jamieson (2014), for example, argues features of climate change (*see* CLIMATE CHANGE) such as the technological magnification of our actions and the spatial and temporal disconnect between actions and effects mean that it is difficult to hold anyone “responsible.” He argues that we should develop new conceptions of responsibility—such as a forward-looking conception he calls “intervention responsibility”—more suited to the challenges that we face today (Jamieson 2015; cf. Young 2006). Stephen Gardiner (2011) has argued that our “theoretical ineptitude” in dealing with problems like climate change leads us to engage in morally corrupt forms of reasoning that subvert our understandings of the problems that we face. Some of our received ethical concepts, however, may play an essential role in confronting the challenges that we face. For example, given their

roles in motivating action in precipitous circumstances, both hope (McKinnon 2014; Moellendorf forthcoming) and fear (McQueen 2021) may be uniquely suited to help us to overcome the dangers of the Anthropocene.

Our political institutions also appear to stand in need of reform in the age of the Anthropocene. Gardiner (2014), for example, has called for a “Global Constitutional Convention” for future generations, to enable us to confront ecological problems with long time horizons. John Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering (2019) locate the problem in pathological path dependencies that have led us into ecological crises and argue that we need to develop forms of governance that allow for “ecological reflexivity.” And under the label of “Earth Systems Governance,” Frank Biermann (2014) has argued for an array of institutional reforms, such as the creation of a Global Environment Organization and UN Councils for sustainable development and for issues that fall outside of the scope of national jurisdiction, designed to integrate the presently fragmented regimes of governance for tackling ecological crises.

### **3. The Anthropocene and the ‘End of Nature’**

The concept of the Anthropocene also has consequences for environmental ethics (*see ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS*), and in particular for our reflection on the concept of nature (*see NATURE AND THE NATURAL*). Some strands of environmental ethics put the concept of nature at their centre, for example by viewing it as a subject of ethical concern in its own right (Katz 1997) or by arguing that we have duties to preserve the integrity of nature (Leopold 2001 [1949]; Callicott 2013). The concept of the Anthropocene, however, appears to put the coherence of such views into question. If humans have transformed the Earth system in its entirety, then it is unclear whether there is such a thing as “nature”—at least in the sense of something untouched by human action—to which we can owe ethical concern or whose integrity can be preserved. Bill McKibben (1989) famously claimed that global warming means that we have reached the “end of nature.” If so, then this would appear to create problems for environmental ethics that puts the concept of nature at its centre.

Environmental philosophers have responded to concerns like these in different ways. Steven Vogel (2015) has argued that we should eschew appeal to the concept of nature. He argues that the concept of ‘nature’ either means everything that is untouched by humans, in which case it appears to be too late to worry about ‘preserving’ nature, or it means everything there is (including humans), in which case it is unclear that we *can* compromise nature’s integrity, since everything we do is part of nature (Vogel 2015, 1–32; Mill 1874). He argues that the focus of environmental philosophy should instead be on thinking about our relationship to the environments that we inhabit and the practices that sustain them. Others, however, have found a use for the concept. Simon Hailwood (2015), for example, has argued that we need the concept of nature to make sense of the contemporary forms of estrangement and alienation from our environment that we experience—even if ultimately, some such forms of estrangement may not always be negative.

The concept of the Anthropocene thus brings to the fore the environmental conditions that usually remain in the background of our philosophical reflection. Ultimately, it serves as an invitation to think through our place in relation to the environment in which we are situated.

SEE ALSO:

Climate Change; Critical Theory; Ecofeminism; Environmental Ethics; Nature and the Natural.

## References

- Ackerman, Diane 2014. *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Anderson, M. Kat 2005. *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Biermann, Frank 2014. *Earth System Governance: World Politics in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Callicott, J. Baird 2013. *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2): 197–222.
- Chernilo, Daniel 2015. "The Question of the Human in the Anthropocene Debate," *European Journal of Social Theory* 20 (1): 44–60.
- Crist, Eileen 2013. "On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature," *Environmental Humanities* 3 (1): 129–47.
- Crutzen, Paul J. 2002. "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (23): 23.
- Dalby, Simon 2015. "Framing the Anthropocene: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *The Anthropocene Review* 3 (1): 33–51.
- Di Chiro, Giovanni 2016. "Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme." In Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dryzek, John, and Jonathan Pickering 2019. *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, Erle 2011. "The Planet of No Return: Human Resilience on an Artificial Earth," *Breakthrough Journal* 2: 39–44.
- Fremaux, Anne, and John Barry 2019. "The "Good Anthropocene" and Green Political Theory: Rethinking Environmentalism, Resisting Eco-Modernism." In Frank Biermann and Eva Löwbrand (eds.) *Anthropocene Encounters: New Directions in Green Political Thinking*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gardiner, Stephen M. 2011. *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Gardiner, Stephen M. 2014. "A Call for a Constitutional Convention Focused on Future Generations," *Ethics & International Affairs* 28 (3): 299–315.
- Hailwood, Simon 2015. *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton, Clive 2016. "The Theodicy of the Good Anthropocene," *Environmental Humanities* 7 (1): 233–38.
- Haraway, Donna 2015. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (1): 159–65.
- Jamieson, Dale 2014. *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed and What It Means for Our Future*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, Dale 2015. "Responsibility and Climate Change," *Global Justice: Theory, Practice, Rhetoric* 8 (2): 23–42.
- Katz, Eric 1997. *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Lenton, Timothy M., Hermann Held, Elmar Kriegler, et al. 2008. "Tipping Elements in the Earth's Climate System," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105 (6): 1786–93.
- Leopold, Aldo 2001 [1949]. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lightfoot, Kent G., Lee M. Panich, Tsim D. Schneider, Sara L. Gonzalez 2018. "European Colonialism and the Anthropocene: A View from Pacific North America," *Anthropocene* 4: 101–15.
- Malm, Andreas 2016. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. London: Verso.
- Malm, Andreas and Alf Hornborg 2014. "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1 (1): 62–69.
- McKibben, Bill 1989. *The End of Nature*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- McKinnon, Catriona 2014. "Climate Change: Against Despair," *Ethics and the Environment* 19 (1): 31–48.
- McNeill, J. R. 2000. *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- McQueen, Alison 2021. "The Wages of Fear: Toward Fearing Well About Climate Change." In Mark Budolfson, Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett (eds.) *Philosophy and Climate Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mill, John Stuart 1874. "Nature." In *Three Essays on Religion*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.
- Moellendorf, Darrel 2017. "Progress, Destruction and the Anthropocene," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 34 (2): 66–88.

- Moellendorf, Darrel forthcoming. *Mobilizing Hope: Climate Change and Global Poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Jason W. 2017. "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (3): 594–630.
- Moore, Jason W. 2018. "The Capitalocene, Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45 (2): 237–79.
- Powys Whyte, Kyle 2018. "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crisis," *Environment and Planning E: Society and Space* 1 (1–2): 224–42.
- Röckstrom, Johan, Will Steffen, Kevin Noone, et al. 2009. "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Nature* 461: 462–75.
- Sharp, Hasana 2020. "Not All Humans: Radical Criticism of the Anthropocene Narrative," *Environmental Philosophy* 17 (1): 143–58.
- Vogel, Steven 2015. *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Walton, Samantha 2020. "Feminism's Critique of the Anthropocene," in Jennifer Cooke (ed.) *The New Feminist Literary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Young, Iris Marion 2006. "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23 (1): 102–30.

### **Suggested Readings**

- Bonneuil, Christophe and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz 2015. *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. London: Verso.
- Cooke, Maeve 2020. "Ethics and Politics in the Anthropocene," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46 (10): 1167–81.
- Ellis, Earle E. 2018. *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Jason W. (ed) 2016. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Purdy, Jedediah 2016. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.