

Beyond Nature? Philosophy in the Anthropocene

Herbert Girardet, Tintern Philosophy Circle, 21st January 2020

Intro:

21st January: Davos, 50th World Economic Forum 2020:

Most topics this year on environment: “the crisis is upon us; Climate change; the Australian fires; healthy futures; save the planet; technology for good.”

Media focus on climate change, ocean plastics etc, as never before.

Convergence of: David Attenborough, 93, and Greta Thunberg, 17.

Reality can no longer be denied or avoided, however inconvenient! Scientific findings are irrefutable!

Human impacts on the environment are being discussed primarily as a scientific and economic issue (externalities). What does this mean for policy, for business, for individual consumers?

But this is also very much a philosophical issue, regarding the wider topic of human relationships to nature.

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Lecture summary:

1. Origin of the discussion about human relationships to nature.
2. The Anthropocene: measurable human impacts on nature. Legacy in soils, in ice deposits and in the oceans.
3. Nature and philosophy. What makes nature different from inanimate matter? Vitalism? Gaia theory?
4. Advocates of no-holds barred economic neo-liberalism: Ayn Rand, Alan Greenspan, Victor Lebow, etc.
5. Eco-philosophy in its various forms. What is wrong with us and our relationship to nature? Karl Marx. Rachel Carsons. Murray Bookchin. Arne Naess.
6. Applied eco-philosophy. EF Schumacher. Teddy Goldsmith. Theodor Roszak. E. O. Wilson: Biophilia. The sustainability imperative... Can we turn the tide?
7. Pope Francis. David Attenborough. Greta Thunberg. etc....

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1. Old testament: Humans as guardians or exploiters of nature? Transition from hunter-gatherer living to farming and beyond. Marshall Sahlins: Stone age economics.

“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over

all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”
Genesis 26.28

The snake, the apple: temptation, expulsion from paradise.

Key philosophical question: Today, whilst as human beings, made of flesh and blood like monkeys, dogs, rabbits and lions – are we part of nature or *are we beyond nature?*

Modern ‘man’ vs. hunter gathers like Pygmies of Eskimo?

Who are we today, in the 21st century?

Like other living creatures we eat and breathe and reproduce, but we increasingly rely on production systems, using machines. Reliance on technology defines us as never before.

The amplified man ... reliance on ‘energy slaves’ ... We take, but we don’t tend to give back in ways that would assure nature’s continuity.

Today human actions constitute a new force of nature, increasingly affecting and determining the only planet known to harbour life.

The Anthropocene! (following the Holocene – the period after the last ice age, 12,000 ago.)

!! 10,000 years ago the body weight of vertebrates on earth was 99 per cent animals, 1 per cent human. Now it is 32 per cent human, 1 per cent wild animals, 67 per cent farm animals.
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We need to try to understand planetary systems in a new way, through the lens of *earth systems science*.

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2. Dutch Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, 2000: “The Anthropocene is known as the "human epoch," dating from the commencement of significant human impacts on Earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change.”

Growing number of books on the Anthropocene. My choice: Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin: *The Human Planet – how we created the Anthropocene* (2018). Professors at University College London.

What are the criteria for Anthropocene: what conditions must be satisfied?

- a. Long-lasting changes to the Earth must be established in natural material, such as rocks, ancient ice or ocean sediment.

b. The date of such a change must be identified.

The 'Orbis spike': Europe invasion of America, leading to the death of some 50 million people via smallpox, the flu and other diseases: Return of forest cover to vast areas of farmland in South and North America. Cooling the planet by forest regrowth – leading to the little ice age in the early 17th century!

But then – the industrial revolution - James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784, based on coal burning: From late 18th century onwards deposits of soot appear in glacial ice cores, indicating increasing atmospheric concentrations of several greenhouse gases. Evidence of CO₂ and methane.

With the industrial revolution, from 1790s onwards, humans become a 'subterranean species'. This was indisputably the start of the Anthropocene.

At that time one billion people globally; just one city of a million people: London.

3. 1789/ 90s: In France the French revolution, in Britain the industrial revolution. Philosophical response 1790s: 'Satanic mills' – William Blake; paintings by Philip de Loutherbourg, etc.

In Germany: Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Naturphilosophie, aimed to restore nature as a central theme of philosophy.

His Naturphilosophie regarded the natural world as a kind of giant organism, as opposed to the views of John Locke, Descartes and Isaac Newton who espoused a mechanical view of the world, regarding it as being like a machine.

"Nature is visible Spirit; Spirit is invisible Nature." "The world is the original, yet unconscious poetry of the mind [Geist]."

Schelling's work links to the concept of Vitalism, the belief that "living organisms are fundamentally different from non-living entities because they contain some non-physical elements, or are governed by different principles, than are inanimate things".

Schelling's philosophy of nature arose out of the demand to respond to the mechanistic determination of nature that was dominant at that time. He sees nature not as a totality of objects that are a mere inert mass, but suggests that nature is subjected to universal laws of causality.

Goethe: "Nature! We are surrounded and embraced by her – unable to depart from her, and also unable to enter her more deeply. We live within her and we are also strangers to her. She speaks to us incessantly, but does not reveal her secrets to us".

The speculative mind begins with unity, and the intuitive.

Nature is the Poetry of Mind. Schelling argued that the laws of nature, which the poet-scientist might comprehend, should also be seen as the laws of free artistic creativity.

This sentiment is also reflected in Wordsworth's Immortality Ode:

“There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.”

Late 18th century: Romantics, etc: Growing disillusionment with materialism gave rise to a new appreciation of spirituality, and the mysteries of living nature.

Nature was seen as a "divine creation, to be set against the artifice of human – industrial civilization.”

Half a century later it was Karl Marx who tried to get to grips with human alienation from nature – as expressed by industrial development and urbanisation:

He theorized about a rupture in the metabolic interaction between humanity and living nature, emanating from capitalist/ industrial production and the growing division and separation between town and country.

This “metabolic rift” is Marx's key conception of ecological crisis tendencies under capitalism: urbanisation and industrial exploitation of nature lead to a systemic conflict between human civilisation and the world’s ecosystems.

According to Marxist scholar John Bellamy Foster, Marx came up with a "mature analysis of the increasingly complex and problematic interchange between humans and nature. It anticipates present-day ecological thought".

Karl Marx and Justus Liebig: 1858, London: Year of the Great Stink, the Thames swamped by sewage.

Illustrated London News, August 1958: “We can colonise the remotest ends of the earth; we can conquer India; we can pay the interest of the most enormous debt ever contracted; we can spread our name, and our fame, and our fructifying wealth to every part of the world; but we cannot clean the River Thames.”

Collision course between humans and nature?

4. Fast forward to the 1950s

Now 2.6 billion people! Hundreds of multi-million cities.

The time after World War two is also called 'the age of acceleration', rapid growth of economies and cities was brought about by a combination of technology change and organisational change, ie. WTO global trade policies.

Antropocene: The traces are found in CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere, microplastics, ice cores; heavy metals and the radioactive nuclei left by nuclear weapons tests.

Why should all this be seen as philosophical issues rather than issues solely for science and economics?

Philosophy, literally "love of wisdom" (Cicero) is the study of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind and language.

Whether we are (still) part of nature, or beyond nature, is surely an important part of that concern.

But are we still part of it? The amplified man argument: 60 energy slaves, 6000 watts per person in Europe; 12,000 watts in the USA.

What is wrong with that?

5. Consumerism and the response to it.

The rise of consumerism: US influential marketing guru Victor Lebow advocated 'forced consumption' in the mid-1950s: "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction in consumption ... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaces and discarded at an ever-growing rate."

Ayn Rand: Reason as an absolute; challenge of the moral code of altruism. The selfish self – why should we concern ourselves for others? 'Freedom'?

Neo-liberal ideology: Global trade regardless of the consequences.

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But: A new earth-centric perspective is emerging – beyond Galileo.

Human relations to planet earth become a major issue.

Lewis Mumford, *The transformations of Man* (1956):

Modern technology, which he called "megatechnics", fails to produce lasting, quality products (by using devices such as consumer credit, instalment buying, non-functioning and defective designs, planned obsolescence, and frequent "fashion" changes.)

"Without constant enticement by advertising, production would slow down and level off to normal replacement demand. Otherwise many products could reach a plateau of efficient design which would call for only minimal changes from year to year."

Rachel Carsons: *Silent Spring* (1962)

Carson's main argument is that humans are out of sync with nature. Pesticides, in particular, have detrimental effects on the environment; they should be termed *biocides*, she argues, because their effects are rarely limited to the target pests. ... Most of the book is devoted to pesticides' effects on natural ecosystems, but four chapters also detail cases of human pesticide poisoning, cancer, and various illnesses attributed to pesticides.

Herbert Marcuse: *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964)

He argues that "advanced industrial society" created false needs, which integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought. we "must operate exclusively on our vast daily energy income from the powers of wind, tide, water, and the direct Sun radiation energy".

Earthrise Photo: Astronaut William Anders on December 24, 1968.

Buckminster Fuller: *Instruction manual for spaceship earth* (1968)

Earth is a spaceship flying through space. It has a finite amount of resources and cannot be resupplied. It is like a mechanical vehicle that requires maintenance, and if it is not kept in its shell and is now ready to enter the next phase of its existence.

Marshall Sahlins: *Stone age economics* (1972)

Sahlins says that we should be careful about celebrating progress: hunter-gatherers did not suffer from deprivation, leading short and brutish lives, but instead lived in a society in which "all the people's wants are easily satisfied." Hunter-gatherer societies are able to achieve affluence by desiring little and meeting those needs/desires with what is available to them. This he calls the "Zen road to affluence: human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate". This he compares to the western way towards affluence, which he terms as the "Galbraithian way" where "man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited and the gap between means and ends can eventually be narrowed by industrial productivity".

Barbara Ward: *Only One Earth* (1972)

The world as a single, vulnerable life-support system for all mankind is not just an attractive moral stance. There exists a single unified system from one end of the cosmos to the other', the orderly macrocosm of the universe to the equally orderly microcosm of the atom and the gene.

Dana Meadows et al: *Limits to Growth*, etc. (1972) Club of Rome

1. To gain insights into the limits of our world system and the constraints it puts on human numbers and activity.
2. To identify and study the dominant elements, and their interactions, that influence the long-term behavior of world systems

The study used the World 3 computer model to simulate the consequence of interactions between the earth and human systems: population, food production, industrialization, pollution, and consumption of nonrenewable natural resources. At the time of the study, all these variables were increasing and were assumed to continue to grow exponentially, while the ability of technology to increase resources grew only linearly.

Given business as usual, i.e., no changes to historical growth trends, the limits to growth on earth would become evident by 2072, leading to "sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity". This includes the following:

X Global Industrial output per capita reaches a peak around 2008, followed by a rapid decline

X Global Food per capita reaches a peak around 2020, followed by a rapid decline

X Global Services per capita reaches a peak around 2020, followed by a rapid decline

X Global population reaches a peak in 2030, followed by a rapid decline

Conclusions:

- a. Growth trends existing in 1972 could be altered so that sustainable ecological and economic stability could be achieved.
- b. The sooner the world's people start striving for the second outcome above, the better the chance of achieving it.

No infinite economic growth possible on a finite planet...

Gregory Bateson: *Steps to an Ecology of mind* (1972)

The central idea in this book is that we create the world that we perceive, not because there is no reality outside our heads. We are destroying our ecosystem and therefore ourselves because we select and edit the reality we see to conform to our beliefs about what sort of world we live in. The man who believes that the resources of the world are infinite will not be able to see his errors, because he will not look for evidence of them.

James Lovelock, *Gaia, a new look at Life on Earth* (1979): The earth as a living, interacting organism... The biosphere has created conditions for its own wellbeing...

But where do we go from here?

6. Practical responses

E. F. Schumacher: *Small Is Beautiful, and, guide for the perplexed* (1973)

Schumacher's philosophy is one of "enoughness", appreciating both human needs and limitations, and appropriate use of technology. It grew out of his study of village-based economics, which he later termed Buddhist economics, which is the subject of the book's fourth chapter.

David Ehrenfeld: *The arrogance of humanism* (1978)

Says: humanism is an 'attitude of thought which sanctifies human ambitions to the detriment of life on earth.'

Erich Fromm: *To have or to be* (1976)

Murray Bookchin, *the Ecology of Freedom* (1982)

Critique of capitalism. He attributed environmental predicaments to the cancerous logic of a system aimed at maximizing profit instead of enriching human lives: "By the very logic of its grow-or-die imperative, capitalism may well be producing ecological crises that gravely imperil the integrity of life on this planet."

No environmental sustainability without social justice ...

Devall, W. and G. Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As if Nature Mattered* (1985)

Deep ecology argues that Western culture's anthropocentric, dualistic, and utilitarian attitude toward nature is eradicating wild nature and may be destroying the ecosphere's capacity to sustain complex life forms.

Deep ecology is an ecological philosophy promoting the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs, plus a restructuring of modern human societies in accordance with such ideas.

Johanna Macy: Council of all beings All beings have a right to exist!

Teddy Goldsmith: *Blueprint for survival, the Great U-Turn, Deindustrialising society:* (1988)

Ecologist magazine: *Blueprint for Survival*; Nature cannot cope with industrial society;

Humans are also adversely affected: loss of community; loss of continuity. Vast externalities!

Return to a society powered by renewable energy, etc.

Vandana Shiva: *Earth Democracy* (2005)

Earth democracy provides a worldview in which humans are embedded in the Earth Family: we are connected to each other through love, compassion, not hatred and violence.

Ecological responsibility and economic justice need to replace greed, consumerism and competition as objectives of human life.

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The big challenge:

Today: 7.6 billion people; the world's average GDP per capita is at least 15 times larger than it was in 1800.

China's economy now is 80 times larger than it was on 1978; 100 cities of 1 million; 10 cities over 10 million... ten times increase in meat consumption. But: President Chi Jinping wants to turn China into an Ecological Civilisation?!

Clean up locally, but what about global responsibilities?

7. Philosophical responses now

Pope Francis, *Laudatio Si, on care for our common home* (2015)

He critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming, and calls all people of the world to take "swift and unified global action".

"Technology and the myth of progress are leading us to commodify human beings and exploit nature. Any harm done to the environment, is harm also done to humanity. The ecological crisis, and the large-scale destruction of biodiversity, can threaten the very existence of the human species."

Meanwhile in Brazil President Bolsonaro says: "Our interest in the Amazon isn't in the Indians or the fucking trees - it's in the minerals."

Ever increasing demands from China for soybeans and meat from the Amazon...

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Meanwhile David Attenborough has finally become a campaigner! Linking up with the teenager Greta Thunberg. She says:

"Listen to the science, it is irrefutable. You are destroying my future."

"We demand that all companies, banks, institutions and governments immediately halt all investments in fossil fuel exploration and extraction, immediately end all fossil fuel subsidies and immediately and completely divest from fossil fuels."

“Climate and environment are hot topics now. But virtually nothing has been done. Without treating this as a real crisis we cannot solve it.”

But: US President Donald Trump has decried climate "prophets of doom" in a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where sustainability is the main theme. He called for a rejection of "predictions of the apocalypse" and said America would defend its economy.

Economist Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Laureate, strongly criticised Mr Trump's speech. According to Reuters news agency he said it was "astounding" and made "as if what we are seeing with our eyes are not there".

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Beyond the amplified man?

We cannot avoid dealing with the consequences of our actions any longer.

The need to overcome the problem of the economic invisibility of Nature.

To align economic and ecological systems it is crucially important to understand that the value of ecosystems services. is vast, and probably more than double the value of the global economy.

New orientations are taking shape: New vegetarian/ vegan movement. Rewilding. Reforestation. Agro-ecology. Circular economy. Ecotechnology. Green new deal. Eco-tourism.

Regenerative development: Under the right conditions, biological resources will always tend to renew themselves, and the inherent regenerative capacity of natural capital, such as forests, soils and aquatic ecosystems, is evident for all to see. We must very urgently give nature a helping hand.

From linear into circular modes. Nature operates as an essentially circular system and invariably all its waste products become sources of new growth: every output by an organism is also an input which renews the living environment. Can we organise our economies to fit this model? Can we develop a practical philosophy that fits the bill?

AND: Need for a new spiritual relationship to nature. Building on a rich variety of eco-philosophy. Karl Marx: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it.”

But: we need to think beyond Marx’s materialism ...

Here in Tintern, in the Wye Valley, much change has occurred over the last centuries. There is no place better than to learn from nature

Learning from the forest, the self-renewing ecosystem, as a model for economic theory and practice ...

Wales's pioneering Wellbeing of Future Generations act!

What to do:

1. Become an 'active ecological citizen' – AONB: Cycle, recycle, buy local or sell electricity, move away from fossil fuels and plastic packaging; support green transport; renewable energy; smarter technology; local food; community participation; resourcefulness and frugality.
2. Minimize meat other than from sustainable sources.
3. Support young peoples' actions.
4. Support Wales' Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Model for UK?
5. Fight materialism
6. Rebuild community life/ sharing resources
7. Invest in green shares...
8. Create Wales Wellbeing for Future Generations council (Sophie Howe)

James Lovelock: Beyond Holocene: Novacene (his new book)

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