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Does the Anthropocene Require Us To Be Saints?

Bennett B. Gilbert
Portland State University, bbg2@pdx.edu

Bennett Gilbert
Assistant Professor, University Studies
117 Cramer Hall
Portland State University
1701 SW Broadway
Portland, Oregon 97201
bbg2@pdx.edu

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Does the Anthropocene Require Us To Be Saints?

In the spirit of this workshop conference, I shall not today advance a thesis or propose any answer to my question. You will hear a problem and the reason this problem should matter to us. A signal-flare from the cubbyhole of academic theory in which I work will accompany the presentation of this problem. For, although I have what I think is an answer to the problem, my views come from the domain of philosophy of history. This is a field and a discourse that is unknown to most American philosophers. Indeed, it is at best severely misunderstood, and by consequence it hardly exists in this country as a professional interest, although in fact many philosophers use it or do it all the time. It is, in my view, a subsuming field—that is to say, it is a fundamental philosophical inquiry that cuts across all topics in so far as they have a diachronic, or roughly "historical," aspect. In any case, the brevity of our

format leaves the presentations short of detail. But the advantage of not arguing an answer is that I get to hear your thoughts. This presentation is one of several salients for thinking through the place of moral life and thought in human temporality and historicity, including that of future history, such as the Anthropocene, and in particular questions about personhood in a milieu in which non-human species might have moral claims upon us. I hope to launch your further consideration of these matters in your work on the Anthropocene and anti-anthropocentrism.

When I ask whether the Anthropocene requires us to be saints, I am asking if any of the conditions of this era in which humankind lives, or will soon live, require us to think conscientiously about whether human moral agents ought to perform supererogatory acts that satisfy moral obligations to others, both human and non-human, that arise in Anthropocene circumstances. Supererogatory acts are those acts that one's understanding of moral good does not require her to do but that it does commend her to do as fulfilment of or as practical or logical extensions of her morality of right and wrong. We commonly say that such acts are "above and beyond the call of duty," such as throwing one's self on a bomb in order to save the lives of others whom it would have hurt or killed without an obstructing intervening act.

One of the many oddities of supererogation is that while it is by definition wholly voluntary and optional, it is also deontic. The concept relies on some notion of duty that is purported to be special and distinct from actual moral obligation in theory, even when in

practice those who perform supererogatory acts often say that duty or moral law required them to perform these acts; indeed, they rarely give any other reason. If you squint at it, supererogation looks like every duty under the moral law of rational freedom in Kant's ethics. There is, so to speak, something passive-aggressive about this concept as usually formulated. For us the concept is useful, even if it cannot be saved from incoherence, because it expresses the perfectionist structure (or temptation) in any deontic moral philosophy. Let us settle for saying that the issue for us concerns non-Kantian supererogatory moral ideals, claims, or counsels to act toward such ideals.

Any anti-anthropocentrism that requires or strongly requires supererogatory behavior is what I call rigid, or thorough-going, anti-anthropocentrism. David Roden discusses a consideration that I regard as an example of supererogation under rigid dis-anthropocentrization. Normatively, it is wrong to inhibit the flourishing of other humans. Would it not then be wrong for us not to live in such a way as to maximize the flourishing of post-human intelligent beings by not preparing the Earth for them or by standing their way by any in any manner?[1] Note that the question as it stands is limited in application to beings of our intelligence or greater intelligence, defined in some way it us not necessary to specify here. The same moral principle can be applied to other kinds of current life on Earth when

[1]David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human,* 121–123, 135, and 186–192.

we ask if it is not a morally correct though supererogatory counsel not to eat meat. Even consequentialists urge supererogatory claims for life in the Anthropocene through "effective altruism." The Oxford philosopher Toby Ord is a good example of this: he owns very little, lives on a small fraction of his salary, and donates the rest. Perhaps this is not sacrifice enough, or perhaps consequentialism mitigates supererogatory claims.

It is not possible to verify now what might or might not be required of us in the Anthropocene future, invisible over the horizon. The extent of the moral demand to dis-anthropocentrize is dependent on this future history in its further reaches, so it is likewise not possible to see what this shall require of us. Ethical rules, or maxims, usually stand between us and the supererogatory. But in the case at hand a highly externalist moral situation, made even more lopsided by a fear of extinction that makes reservations about de-centering ourselves appear to be foolish and vain, rules do little to protect us from unbearable burdens.

Therefore, we must ask whether our conceptions of good moral life and of right acts constrain in any way the supererogatory claims of the Anthropocene upon us. For example:

1. If one is asked to take a drug that will adjust the human mind to act in accord with contemporary expectations of Anthropocene dis-anthropecentrization but that might have very serious side-effects, should she take it?

2. If one knows that a more efficient life-form (such as fungi) can colonize humans so as to create a more sustainable biosphere by prevailing over our species, should she try to

stop it?

3. If one knows that by eating the minimal survivable diet and by living without power or other ecocidal conveniences she will improve the lives of our descendants, should she live in this way?

4. If one knows that a particular variety of suicide will improve life for a successor intelligent species in Earth that is soon to appear, should she commit suicide?

5. If Anthropocene dis-anthropecentrization requires that we not reproduce, should we cease to reproduce?

6. If thorough-going dis-anthropecentrization convincingly and empirically entails that we must not use technology that clearly benefits humans and that cannot be replaced, should we cease to use it?

7. If thorough-going dis-anthropecentrization convincingly and empirically argues that humankind cease to use certain raw materials from Earth or from other planets for our well-being, should we cease to find or to use such materials?

8. If thorough-going dis-anthropecentrization convincingly and empirically shows that caring for human survival creates conditions that degrade the survival of other current species, or species yet to come, or artificial intelligences, or advanced aliens, should we cease to care for human survival?

9. Do the moral claims of successor species counsel us to forego grief or alarm at the demise of humankind?

10. What moral claims does machinic intelligence have on us today?

These questions illustrate what I mean when I ask whether the Anthropocene requires us to be saints.

This problem will remind some of you of the distinction between deep ecology and shallow ecology. Or it will bring to mind the ideas of Pentti Linkola, who said, "If there were a button I could press, I would sacrifice myself without hesitating, if it meant millions of people would die."[2] I find that Zoltan Báldiszár Simon's distinction between "critical posthumanism" and "technological posthumanism" is useful here. The former seeks a just balance between humankind and the nonhuman. On the other hand,

> Technological posthumanism is not concerned with describing already existing non-human inhabitants of the planet as fellows to humans. Instead, it invests in the prospect of bringing about not-yet-existing non-human beings in various ways, from enhanced beings escaping human confines to the expected creation of greater-than-human machine intelligence. Put differently, technological posthumanism envisions the emergence of an era of posthumanity.[3]

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[2]Dana Milbank, "A Strange Finnish Thinker Posits War, Famine as Ultimate 'Goods," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, 24 May 1994: 1

[3]Zoltan Báldiszár Simon, "(The Impossibility of) Acting Upon a Story that We Can Believe," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* , vol. 22, no. 1 (2018): 114 (1054–125) https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2017.1419445

Much of the best work on our "historical future" is today done by philosophers of history. Simon is a leader in this, and although I very much disagree with him I commend his writings to your attention.

Simon also challenges the favorable reception that the Anthropocene has received in the humanities. He thinks it is too easy, and in this I agree with him. This is at least in part a case of glamor overriding full awareness of the moral claims that a glamorous idea entails. As with the love of "vibrant matter" and neo-materialisms, the academic humanities must continue to think in chief about how to judge these claims. Consider these words of Pentti Linkola, whom I mentioned a moment ago:

> What to do, when a ship carrying a hundred passengers suddenly capsizes and only one lifeboat? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship's axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides of the boat.[4]

I contend that Linkola's line of thought was the most rebarbative version of deep ecology. He thought it through all the way to the end of the line.

You can find ways to beat back his awful extremism, but you must undertake this task

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[4]Pentti Linkola, "The Doctrine Of Survival And Doctor Ethics," chapter VI of *The Woreld and We* (1992) at http://www.penttilinkola.com/pentti_linkola/ecofascism_writings/translations/voisikoelamavoittaa_translation/VI%20-%20The%20World%20And%20We/

by fully using all the theoretical tools. These are, broadly, in my view, of two sorts. First: the concepts and methods of normative ethics, for one of the whole points of philosophical thought is to think an idea out to all the corners, the very dark corners, to which mere a priori thought leads. And the second comes straight out of the first: it is politics and the rest of moral philosophy. For it is real human well-being, happiness, and joy, or suffering and sadness that are at stake here. As many scientists have acknowledged, the Anthropocene and dis-anthropocentrization are political ideas and rhetorical concepts to a far greater degree, and require struggles of those kids, than the enjoyment of fresh critical perspectives by academics leads us to realize.

The response I expect to come rapidly is that we must view dis-anthropocentrization by taking up the perspective of Speculative Realism and particular that of Object-Oriented Ontology. Now, for reasons too intricate in detail here, I reject much of all New Realisms and neo-materialisms because of problems in their clotted logic and metaphysics, and I thoroughly reject Speculative Realism and particularly Object-Oriented Ontology because of these issues and because of their hopeless conceptions of historicity and sociality and because of the bad politics following therefrom—problems that not all New Realisms fully share. The point for present concerns is that if you expect object-oriented ontology to guide you through the kind of moral quandary I have raised, it will not do. Instead, you must use it to squash the moral dilemmas in order to establish the ontology you want. But Object-Oriented Ontology and related thought will not counsel you in moral matters after it has been

established because it has already decided them. It can be established solely upon its defenders' preferred conclusions or deflections as to most of these issues, because it evacuated the issues. Moral life comes before ontology—this is my view because it is true—and this a good example.

In order actually to consider the kinds of question that this problematic generates, here are several considerations from within the constitution of moral experience that will bear on proper phenomenological and existential deliberation in this field.

1. How do we manage our self-destructiveness that de-centering humankind might provoke?

2. What right actions might the limits of human consciousness interdict?

3. As against the impartialist normativity of rigid anti-anthropocentrism, how do we theorize the local loyalties and projects that deeply characterize human sociality?

4. What use are imperfect rights of non-humans that are counterpart to the perfect duties attending self-preservation of our species?

5. How do we understand relationality in the Anthropocene?

6. What are the elements of a constructive concept of a good community, or polity, that includes humans and nonhumans?

7. What political projects concerning justice press us? What can improved democracy contribute or not contribute?

In the case of the Anthropocene we see a powerful interconnection between

understanding history and knowing the right things to do. In the case of dis-anthropocentrization, the basis of the historical-temporal mode of human existence—the key discovery of modernity, of which the phenomenology of *Dasein* is an exemplary but by no means the only component—is challenged in so far as it is a presentation of more traditional humanism. What was revolutionary in modernity thus now blurs into a process from the past it presumed to reject. One can with good reason contend that this is true of every revolution at least from early modernity to the present. So the final question with which I shall leave you is:

Will the outcome if what at this point appear to be the "unprecedented challenges" of our relation to the natural world require us to dispose of the human model of personhood — descending from Protagoras' statement of the human measure—in favor of sacrificing humankind, or will we be able to improve the human lot from its present awful state, or will the future turn out to be, as it so often does, pretty much the same mixture of good and bad, of justice and injustice, of blessings and of misery, as the past has been?