



COMMENTARY

The Theodicy of the “Good Anthropocene”

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To the dismay of those who first proposed it, the Anthropocene is being reframed as an event to be celebrated rather than lamented and feared.¹ Instead of final proof of the damage done by techno-industrial hubris, the ‘ecomodernists’ welcome the new epoch as a sign of man’s ability to transform and control nature. They see it as evidence neither of global capitalism’s essential fault nor of humankind’s shortsightedness and rapacity; instead, it arrives as an opportunity for humans finally to come into their own.

A few years ago Erle Ellis began to speak of the ‘good Anthropocene,’ an unlikely juxtaposition now amplified into the idea of the ‘great Anthropocene’ and set out in *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*.² There are no planetary boundaries that limit continued growth in human populations and economic advance, they argue. ‘Human systems’ can adapt and indeed prosper in a warmer world because history proves our flexibility.

In this view, as we enter the Anthropocene we should not fear transgressing natural limits; the only barrier to a grand new era for humanity is self-doubt. Ellis urges us to see the Anthropocene not as a crisis but as “the beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity.”³ Romantic critics of technology (and the gloomy scientists they draw on) stand in the way of the vision’s realization. For Ellis and those of like mind, humanity’s transition to a higher level of planetary significance is ‘an amazing opportunity.’ Unashamed to place ‘good’ next to ‘Anthropocene,’ they believe “we will be proud of the planet we create in the Anthropocene”⁴ and are fond of quoting Stewart Brand: “We are as gods, so we may as well get good at it.”

Although the ecomoderns write as humanists, they construe the new epoch in a way that is structurally a theodicy, that is, a theological argument that aims to prove the ultimate

¹ This short piece was originally prepared as a presentation to the Breakthrough Dialogue, Sausalito, 22 June 2015.

² John Asafu-Adjaye, Linus Blomqvist, Stewart Brand, Barry Brook, Ruth de Fries, Erle Ellis, Christopher Foreman, David Keith, Martin Lewis, Mark Lynas, Ted Nordhaus, Roger Pielke Jr., Rachel Pritzker, Joyashree Roy, Mark Sagoff, Michael Shellenberger, Robert Stone, and Peter Teague, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” accessed 9 October 2015, <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto>.

³ Erle Ellis, “The Planet of no Return,” *Breakthrough Journal* 2, Fall (2011).

⁴ Erle Ellis, “Neither Good nor Bad,” *New York Times*, 23 May 2011.

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benevolence of God. In Christian apologetics the proof of God's goodness in a world of suffering was first attempted by Augustine, and later taken up by Leibniz who (in his book *Theodicy*) argued that evil acts, when we take a larger perspective, are necessary to the functioning of the whole. What may appear to us as monstrous crimes to which God acquiesces must be understood as in the service of his greater, if mysterious, benevolence. In Leibniz's pithy aphorism: "Everything happens for the best" or, in the troubling words of Alexander Pope, "Whatever is, is right." It was a sentiment satirized by Voltaire in the shape of Dr Pangloss who, after being reduced to the status of a syphilitic beggar, clung to his optimistic outlook. His endearing personality trait became his deluded philosophy of life.

So theodicy is a response to the existence of evil in a world created by a benevolent God. It did not take long for a vigorous theological dispute to become secularized.⁵ Hegel's philosophical system saw evil subsumed in the larger movement of world history, whose goal and endpoint is the full actualization of Spirit or Mind. To take this view required Hegel to cleave to the idea, common then as now, that the world moves according to some 'ultimate design,' in his case the unfolding of self-consciousness.⁶ However much we may recoil from its particulars, the world unfolds as it ought to—along the path to a glorious finale. In this way, evil is elevated to the metaphysical sphere and is no longer a merely moral question. After Hegel, Marx too rejected moral explanations for suffering, but he brought evil down from the metaphysical sphere to the material one; the immiserisation of the proletariat became a necessary stage in the attainment of a classless utopia.

The 'good Anthropocene' argument is founded on a belief in the ultimate benevolence of the whole, the order of things, a goodness that in the end transcends and defeats the structural obstacles, sufferings and moral lapses that seem to threaten it. That this belief is rarely voiced only bespeaks its secret power. Exploring its parallels with theodicy is to demystify rather than debunk it. (I am not opposed to the sense of a historical unfolding underlying all forms of theodicy.) In the world of the good Anthropocene, the new geological epoch is greeted not as imminent peril but as, in Ellis's words, a "forward-looking vision of the planet"⁷ or in those of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, as "an optimistic view toward human capacities and the future," a *great Anthropocene* of "universal human dignity on a biodiverse and thriving planet."

Climate disruption is viewed as a treatable side effect of the modernization process—a growing pain that the growth process itself will resolve. Whereas in Leibniz's theodicy God's will ensures all is for the good, for the ecomoderns it is Progress driven by man's creativity and urge to betterment that ensures good will prevail. So in place of a *theodicy* they instate an '*anthropodicy*' in which human-directed Progress takes the place of God. The goodness that will prevail does not reside in the hearts of men and women but in the order of things, an order that mobilizes the creativity and resourcefulness of humans. In the end the ecomoderns' commitment to the good Anthropocene is a secular manifestation of the religious idea of

⁵ See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 86.

⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 86

⁷ Ellis, "The Planet of no Return."

Providence, with Man rather than God guiding human destiny. We have seen the future, and it is good.

So the structure of the 'good Anthropocene' argument is essentially a Hegelian theodicy; evil, here read as ecological damage, is construed as a contradiction essential to driving history forward towards the realization of the Absolute, here read as unstoppable progress towards universal prosperity. Hegel inscribed his theodicy into the process of logic, the unfolding of a rational order, to "enable us to comprehend all the ills of the world, including the existence of evil, so that the thinking spirit may be reconciled with the negative aspects of existence."⁸

For today's ecomoderns, technologically sophisticated humans are quite capable of transcending temporary environmental setbacks. For Ellis, "humans appear fully capable of continuing to support a burgeoning population by engineering and transforming the planet."⁹ In the service of the inherent dynamic of Progress the negativity of ecological damage is sublated or assimilated into a positive force for change. In practice, the outcome is the product of a collaboration between a robust Nature and a creative species whose hegemony is ordained. If in the structure of theodicy man is the creation of God in His image, and therefore always subject to a greater power, in the ecomoderns' anthropodicy man is the creature of Nature as its highest living form. But Nature is not a power that rules over man; the tables are turned, and man rules over Nature.

So the Anthropocene's manifestation in the ecological crisis does not represent regress but makes possible, through its overcoming, a leap to a higher stage. It is not that the suffering of this world will be compensated by the rewards of another, but that the sufferings that may have to be endured in the short term will be vindicated in the marvelous world we will create in the good, the *great*, Anthropocene. We will cultivate a planetary garden, in the words of ecomodernism's chief spokesmen, where "nearly all of us will be prosperous enough to live healthy, free, and creative lives."¹⁰ If, say the ecomoderns, critics of the system could escape their self-imposed despondency they would see that the opposition between humans and nature is reconcilable, and that climate change is a trial to be met and won with technology. Not only is it too soon to give up on Utopia, the Anthropocene is the kick in the pants we need finally to reach it.

In the 18th and 19th centuries theodicy attracted fierce controversy. Immanuel Kant attacked theodicy as immoral and blasphemous because it goes beyond what we can know about God. We cannot know what God wants so "we cannot judge what is best for the whole."¹¹ A Kantian argument against the good Anthropocene might be that we cannot know the ultimate outcome of the Anthropocene because it is beyond our capacity to predict the Earth system's behaviour and, more to the point, beyond our capacity to control it. The Earth always retains something mysterious and inaccessible (Schelling's 'indivisible remainder') and in the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene forces have been unleashed that we can only ever understand imperfectly and regulate even less.

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H.B. Nisbet. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 43.

⁹ Ellis, "The Planet of no Return."

¹⁰ Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "Love Your Monsters," Breakthrough Institute website, 29 November 2011, <http://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/programs/philosophy/love-your-monsters-ebook>

¹¹ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 69-70.

The theodicy-like structure of the good Anthropocene argument also alerts us to its essential political and moral flaw. Theodicy was condemned by its critics because it led to quietism; if suffering is justified because it serves God's larger purpose we must accept it calmly and not attempt to change the world. We should leave it to Providence, human destiny under God's guidance. Ecomoderns are not quietists who sit in contemplation awaiting the good Anthropocene's arrival; instead, they want to smooth its path. Their political engagement is directed towards facilitating the attainment of that which is ordained. Their task is to protect and defend the system so that it has the chance to fulfill its promise.

In her superb study of theodicy, *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Neiman observed that "Providence is a tool invented by the rich to lull those whom they oppress into silent endurance."¹² The same may be said for the invention of the good Anthropocene: for the victims inclined to protest against the system, the golden promise of a new dawn lulls them into silent endurance. The message of the good Anthropocene to those suffering now and in the future from human-induced droughts, floods and heat waves is: You are suffering for the greater good; we will help to alleviate it if we can but your pain is justified.

As humanists the ecomoderns claim to found the good Anthropocene argument on science rather than faith or politics, and here it can be shown that their vision of the future is based on a serious misunderstanding.

Good Anthropocene, Bad Science

Throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries the new science of geology was dominated by uniformitarianism, the idea that the Earth is shaped by slow-moving forces that gradually transform it over very long time periods. Determined to distance the new science from Biblical accounts of instantaneous creation *ex nihilo*, the emerging profession was reluctant to accept any theory of catastrophism in which a transition from one period in Earth history to the next may be due to some natural paroxysm.

In the end, the evidence for catastrophic changes (due, for example, to asteroid strikes) could no longer be resisted and geologists accepted that gradual change can at times be interrupted by cataclysms. Today the Geological Time Scale includes several transitions from one era or epoch to the next caused by catastrophic events. They are 'catastrophic' because change is so rapid that most existing life forms cannot adapt and die out.

Ecomoderns have regressed to 19th-century uniformitarianism. Their central scientific claim is expressed by Peter Kareiva and colleagues: "Nature is so resilient that it can recover rapidly from even the most powerful human disturbances."¹³ The belief that ecosystems can 'bounce back' is carried over to their interpretation of the Anthropocene. Ellis puts it plainly: "Humans have dramatically altered natural systems ... and yet the Earth has become more productive and more capable of supporting the human population. ... *there is little evidence to date that this dynamic has been fundamentally altered.*"¹⁴

¹² Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 182.

¹³ Peter Kareiva, Robert Lalasz and Michelle Marvier, "Conservation in the Anthropocene," *Breakthrough Journal* 2, Fall (2011).

¹⁴ Ellis, "The Planet of No Return." Emphasis added.

These statements reflect a total misreading of the science of the Anthropocene. The foundational point made by the Earth scientists who proposed the Anthropocene is that the dynamic between humans and the Earth *has* been fundamentally altered over the last two to three centuries. The essential point of Anthropocene science is precisely the opposite of Ellis's understanding. The Anthropocene is put forward not as a description of the further spread of human impacts on the landscape or ecosystems but as *a new epoch in the Geological Time Scale*, a phase shift in the functioning of the Earth system as a whole. It is not a continuation of the past but a step change in the geological record.

The previous step change, out of the Pleistocene and into the Holocene, saw an 8°C change in global average temperature, a 35-metre change in sea levels and widespread extinctions. Geologically speaking, the Anthropocene event, occurring over an extremely short period, is an instance of catastrophism rather than uniformitarianism.

In this light, Ellis's disquisitions on the adaptability of agricultural systems as proof of nature's resilience are anachronisms in the precise sense of the word. The Holocene conditions that Ellis and others use to defend the idea of the 'good Anthropocene' have been relegated to the past. Whatever its validity in the Holocene, the argument that ecosystems are not fragile but resilient and can 'bounce back' from human disturbance is not relevant to the Anthropocene. We are not witnessing small fluctuations in a process of continuous change; we are witnessing a rupture in Earth's history—a rapid transition to a new geological epoch, or perhaps an era, that is *permanent*.

Throughout its geo-history the planet has never 'bounced back' from one epoch to the previous one. The Earth has now crossed a point of no return; its great cycles have changed, the chemical compositions of air and ocean have been altered in ways that cannot be undone. By the end of the century it will very likely be hotter than it has been for 15 million years.

In short, the Earth system is now operating in a different mode and nothing we can do now, even ending the burning of fossil fuels in short order, can get it to 'bounce back' to the Holocene. It will never look like the Holocene again, so arguments based on Holocene conditions are simply misleading. Whatever its validity at a local level, the ecomoderns' ecosystem thinking has been superseded by Earth system thinking, and applying it to the Anthropocene is akin to making Newtonian arguments about a quantum world.

The Breakthrough Institute, the institutional centre of ecomodernism, is based in San Francisco. California is trapped in a mega-drought brought about by the collapse of runoff from snowmelt. It is the kind of extreme weather that is expected to become increasingly frequent and more severe.¹⁵ It is all set out with frightening detachment in the 'Impacts' reports of the IPCC. I ask myself what kind of thinking clicks in when the ecomodernist reads these stories or sees the images on the television. How does one overlay images of mega-drought or Hurricane Sandy or the sinking Maldives with a narrative of a good Anthropocene? For me, this remains a mystery.

¹⁵ Alan Neuhauser, "Record California Drought Linked to Climate Change," *US News and World Report*, accessed 2 March 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/02/record-california-drought-linked-to-climate-change>.

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