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## Anthropos and Human Agency

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

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Paul Raskin has [challenged](#) us to think of the Anthropocene epoch not as an epic battle between a Promethean Anthropos and a bountiful but vulnerable Earth, but as “a contingent outcome of the historical path etched by human agency.” This is useful because it personalizes the hard problem of transformational change by situating it in “the teleology of social vision and the impetus of social struggle.”

Agency begins with the individual, but at the same time Paul is right to emphasize the importance of social context. Personal action needs plurality in the same way that performance artists need an audience; without the presence and acknowledgement of others, action has no meaning. A global citizens movement as a form of transformative social struggle, for example, must be grounded in the uniqueness of individual agency, but made strong in a context of social solidarity.

The foregoing offers a down-to-earth kind of pragmatic humanism, but there is also a more holistic path forward, grounded in transcendent realism.

Because context is important to agency, I question Raskin’s dismissal of the Anthropos vs. Earth perspective, which he calls a “profound misconception about human history.” It is actually quite compelling to see (as an ecologist would) humanity as a single super-species fully capable of invasively overrunning the planet—which is exactly what we’ve done, i.e., growing aggressively because we can—but equally because we want to. Instead of choosing to rein in the atavistic impulse to expand our dominion, human agency on the whole is fully aligned with and adds

tremendous impetus to it. These contextual elements of the whole-Earth gestalt are both deeply implicated in the onset of the Anthropocene.

The criticism levied against this holistic point of view, Paul Raskin argues, is that it posits an undifferentiated “we” which does not exist. On the other hand, however, highlighting diversity can obscure the general form, function, and character of the whole which comprises those various parts; one can lose the forest for the trees—in this case, a singular entity called “human society,” which now finds itself entangled in a self-induced existential struggle on one indivisible planet.

Individual agency is nonetheless intimately engaged with this broad-brush picture. The tension between biological imperatives and volitional oversight is common to both macro- and micro-scale behavior, and in that sense, both perspectives are identical. The difference between the two is that individual people generally are reasonable and morally sensible, but large groups are not. Reasoned, morally sound supervision of social behavior diminishes from individual to group, diminishes even further as group size grows larger, and hits bottom with the human population as a whole. The result is that human society on Earth is easily tantalized by simplistic ideas and momentary impulses, easily stampeded into unreflective, emotion-driven behavior which lacks subtlety, sophistication, and direction. Instead of an informed and progressive global polity, it seems more likely that “[t]he masses always incline to herd behavior...and to mob hysteria, hence their witless brutality and emotionalism,” and that “[t]he greatest weapon of mass destruction on the planet is the collective human ego.”<sup>1</sup> These harsh observations speak both to the reality of Anthropos and to the challenge of making it responsive to individual oversight.

How, then, can agency and “social struggle” be interwoven with the contextual elements of a larger, species-centric story, and to what advantage? Environmentalists (among many others) often speak of “holism” and, with this in mind (but steering clear of New Age mysticism), it seems to me that, in a real but transcendent sense, each person is Anthropos. Each of us is immersed in a natural continuum which implicates the individual with community and with society at large through a nested series of emergent features, all dynamically linked in an evolving whole. Because of this linkage—this union of the one and the many—small-scale local change may

(like the butterfly effect) reverberate through to and, conceivably, overwhelm the morally irresponsible worldview now dominating the gestalt of human behavior on Earth.

This may seem far-fetched, but it is worth emphasizing that what we are doing to the planet and to ourselves is a moral problem as much as a practical one. In that sense, ideas (including beliefs, intentions, and ethical propensities) which travel easily and quickly through time and across scales, should play a leading role. The continuum I have described is helpful in this respect because it joins person with society and, more broadly, joins the very primordial stuff of existence with, from a Platonic point of view, “a sentient universe charged with moral meaning,” that is, the foundations of moral order implicit in the natural world.<sup>2</sup> And herein lies the key to agency (according to transcendent realism) with respect to the social evolution of a planetary civilization. If true agency begins with, and emanates from, the individual person, and if that person can reasonably be construed as being at one, so to speak, with *Anthropos* and with an implicate Universe, then “individual action should neither atomize the world nor dissolve each part into the totality...[people should] experience themselves as processes of becoming, actively participating in the becoming of the world.”<sup>3</sup> To put this more plainly, the union between subject and context is such that personal efforts to override impulsive, purposeless behavior and instead to become more acutely aware of (perhaps absolute conceptions of) the good, the true, and the beautiful will inevitably promote the social and moral evolution of the *Anthropic* psyche.

The successful operationalization of these observations—which is to say, the realization of “a new consciousness attuned to our shared planetary fate,” as Raskin put it—might usefully begin from purposeful participation in interwoven processes of becoming from which creative social change will emerge. An early burst of human creativity, well-intentioned but morally unsound, has already spawned the *Anthropocene* epoch and the serious challenges it portends, so our new cosmology will unavoidably feature self-inflicted danger. But the merger of individual agency with *Anthropos* (and beyond) can afford the opportunity to tame the *Promethean* animal, and to rejoin our uniquely transcendent endowments to the planet that gave us life. Only having done so will we be able to fully engage the possibility of exploring at our leisure the true and unlimited potential of all that we are, and all that we can be.

## Endnotes

1. Carl G. Jung, *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 6; William Ophuls, *Plato's Revenge: Politics in the Age of Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 72.
2. Ophuls, *Plato's Revenge*, 21.
3. Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 155–157.

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## About the Author



Stephen Purdey is an international relations specialist whose work focuses on the evolution of new forms of global governance to meet current social-ecological challenges. He is the author of such books as *Economic Growth, the Environment and International Relations: The Growth Paradigm*; *The Normative Root of the Climate Change Problem*; and *The Environmental Crisis: Metanarrative and the Moral Evolution of Modern Human Society* (forthcoming). Prior to his academic career, he worked for in the private sector, in Canadian federal politics, and with NGOs such as the United Nations Association, the World Federalists, and the Earth Council. He holds a PhD from the University of Toronto.

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