A LOVE OF IDEAS

Our environment: damaged and endangered by human egotism and error

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THIS CHAPTER is about wellbeing in the Anthropocene. 'The Anthropocene' is the name given to the new chronological period the Earth is said to now be in as a result of human modifications, representing its exit from the Holocene (the past, relatively stable 10–12 millenia). Proposers of the term — Nobel Prize–winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and colleagues, including Australian earth system scientist Will Steffen — argue that recognition of a new era is warranted due to the combined effects of human activities such as land clearing, savannah burning, agriculture, damming, mining, forestry, industrialisation and urbanisation (including our ongoing spreading of 'Anthropocene rock', that is, asphalt): 'The human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system.'[1,2]

One of the central tenets of the concept of wellbeing is that we are affected by and dependent upon the natural environment. Whether in relation to material resources such as fuel, water and soil, ecological services such as waste treatment and pollination, or intangible notions of place, beauty and vitality, we are increasingly aware that our physical and mental

wellbeing is strongly shaped by the natural environment around us. This mainstreaming of environmental awareness has led to rising concern about the many negative ways we are affecting nature. Combined with our growing sense of planetary scale and the trends revealed by 'Big Data' science, this environmental awareness has contributed to the increasingly prominent idea that since the 'Great Acceleration' in resource use and waste production that marks the emergence of industrialisation, our accumulated impacts on biological, ecological, hydrological, pedological, geological, atmospheric and climatological systems have collectively pushed the Earth into a proposed new planetary epoch: the Anthropocene — the Age of Humans — and a rewriting of the recent past.[3,4] Just as the wellbeing narrative recalibrates the goal of human existence from living to flourishing, the Anthropocene recalibrates the human context from a relatively stable and benign environment to one damaged and dangerous as a result of human egotism and error.

From both a material and psychological point of view, addressing the problem of our Anthropocene condition is a prerequisite for us achieving ever more ambitious levels of human wellbeing. As the planet approaches what some scientists suggest are environmental boundaries and limits — thresholds beyond which existing systems will change rapidly, irreversibly and negatively from a human perspective[5] — our reliance on and responsibility to threatened systems has become a matter of self-interest as well as ethical concern. Instrumentally, this is partly because we are contending not only with the direct effects of human interference in nature — for example, pollution — but the unpredicted and largely unpredictable ways in which the diversity of nature is responding. For example, we are now impelled to address atmospheric emissions such as ozone not only because these byproducts of our development processes directly reduce the quality of our atmosphere, leading to such things as poor visibility, lost

agricultural productivity and human illness, but because we are increasingly aware that over the longer term many of these emissions are contributing to human-induced climate change, the acidification of the ocean, and the multiple far-reaching threats they pose.

While the rationale for 'addressing the Anthropocene' in the name of human wellbeing is widely accepted, what should such a project actually involve? The originators of the Anthropocene idea are explicit about the strong environmentalist message they attach to the concept, calling urgently for 'effective planetary stewardship'.[6] But, long-standing debates about sustainability and more recent debates about climate change demonstrate that agreeing to do something about the environment problem is very different from agreeing what should actually be done, especially when the problem involved is unprecedented in scale and complexity. Among the many basic distinctions that debate centres on is the tension between so-called weak and strong sustainability approaches. Weak sustainability or ecological modernisation is the most explicitly anthropocentric. It aims for sustainability in so far as it benefits current generations of humans, taking careful note of the distribution of costs of acting to ameliorate or avoid environmental damage relative to the costs such damage is calculated to impose. Weak sustainability is comprehended within the constraints of contemporary neoclassical economics in which diverse processes and things are compared against a common yardstick of imagined monetary value. Not only are natural elements framed as comparable in this way, but they are imagined as interchangeable such that tradeoffs between them can be calculated and an overall 'optimum' situation can be identified. Elements from different spheres or 'dimensions' (for example, social, economic, environmental) of the sort that are integrated within new wellbeing or 'comprehensive wealth' measures are also imagined as comparable and substitutable.[7]

In many situations this framing reinforces the 'economy versus environment' idea that humans and nature are competing stakeholders, both in terms of policy agendas and evolutionary advantage. From this standpoint, 'looking after nature' makes sense to the extent that it helps nature 'look after us', but no further.

The weak sustainability approach is exemplified by current attitudes to climate change. In most jurisdictions, mitigating climate change is currently politically defensible to the extent that it will clearly reduce unwanted climate change impacts upon things we currently value, as long as the costs of predicted impacts are substantially greater than the costs of mitigating them (noting that future impact costs are strongly discounted relative to present day mitigation costs). Climate change adaptation is similarly framed as desirable to the extent it involves the cost-efficient neutralisation or reduction of impacts on current valuable assets. While nature features in these imaginaries as a collection of distributed valued objects (for example, national parks and agricultural crops) that need to be defended through human adaptation efforts, and as a useful tool in adaptation and carbon sequestration efforts (for example, mangroves that help ameliorate coastal flooding, trees to absorb carbon), its primary role is as the climate that human society needs to be defended from (obscuring the role of humans in creating the problem). Thus, climate change adaptation is still predominantly conceived in strongly human-centric terms that revive old narratives of Humans battling to control Nature. This is evident in the way adaptation is framed by organisations such as the World Bank as 'climate-resilient development': a new take on sustainable development that casts nature as something to be secured against as much as sustained. Adaptation is in this way distanced from images of vulnerable nature and unpopular Western environmentalist agendas with their perceived elitism and disinterest in the everyday struggles of ordinary people.

In contrast to adaptation's focus on partial or full loss avoidance, wellbeing is commonly framed in terms of positive abundance. It is presented as an alternative to a miserable biomedical view of health as the mere absence of illness, or a meagre image of development as the mere absence of poverty. In many incarnations, the wellbeing agenda not only attempts to broaden our view away from single dimensions of progress such as GDP or life expectancy, but aims to lift our sights from surviving to thriving, from simply getting by to achieving an enriched and meaningful life.[8] How such ambitions are imagined to relate to sustainability varies widely. For some, the raising of the bar on what counts as a good human life implicitly raises the priority we give to our own needs, including needs we may not have realised we had. We need, some wellbeing narratives argue, to focus more intently on optimising our bodily health, connecting with other people, celebrating our strengths. We need to demand more from life.

While this revitalisation of an Enlightenment spirit usefully relieves the tedium of a unidimensional focus on income or longevity, it is not necessarily more inclusive of nature. Many visions of human wellbeing are strongly human-centric. They implicitly celebrate the ideal of human exceptionalism: the presumption that humans are superior because we are seemingly unique in being able to achieve lives full of purpose and meaning.[9] Whether such higher lives are characterised by rationality and/or spirituality, they allow us to replace mere 'being' with 'wellbeing', which becomes equated with genuine human being. The emphasis on human uniqueness in some wellbeing discourses often means that while communion with better quality natural assets and spaces is presented as a desirable and necessary part of our route to wellbeing and true humanness, the actual underlying attitude to the environment is no less instrumental than that in more pecuniary versions of weak sustainability. Indeed, some interpretations of wellbeing

ambitions explicitly value wellbeing as a route to financial gain. This is not only because wellbeing is an emerging industry and consumption driver, or because wellbeing discourses can encourage individualism of the sort that characterises the modern consumer, but because corporations and governments increasingly desire the productivity gains promised by 'well' employees and citizens.[10] Aim for more than productivity, this business dictum holds, because productivity then benefits.

There are, of course, far more radical readings of the wellbeing agenda aligned with a stronger and more genuine version of environmental sustainability. Here, the challenges that wellbeing poses to conventional policy goals are more profound than a simple multiplication or extension of existing objectives. Wellbeing is core to many emerging calls for cultural transformation and alternative ways of living.[11] Although environmental losses are just one of the costs of modern living that a growing number of people are reacting against, granting non-human nature more care and respect is an increasingly common component of the better futures that are being envisaged. That something is profoundly wrong with our human-nature relationship is increasingly recognised as common sense by diverse groups.

Following the uplifting opening stanza of harmonious dissent and urgency — a resounding 'no' to our current situation — comes a dissonant cacophony of proposed responses. For some, the urgency of the current threats to human wellbeing demands immediate and radical intervention of the sort that only large-scale technological experiments can provide. For these scientists and entrepreneurs, impending planetary scale shifts in human living conditions call for planetary scale engineering ambition. Informed by science fiction, they are reimaging the Earth as a machine in need of fixing, a 'geoengine' whose prior inadvertent modification by humans demands ongoing intervention, whether through large-scale

carbon dioxide removal or grand solar radiation management projects.[12] The natural inclination of technophiles and geoengineering advocates are not limited to those who love playing with models and prototypes. As with other radical technological interventions proposed in the name of sustainability, such as nuclear energy and genetic modification (both ideas that are enjoying increased prominence in the current climate of threatened wellbeing), geoengineering is being proposed by some who would identify themselves as environmentalists, including the architects of the Anthropocene idea.[13] Nevertheless, there is a strong sense in which advocates favour geoengineering for the way it not only promises to secure human wellbeing, but for the way it promises to express and enhance human wellbeing in its own right by providing a striking demonstration of human ingenuity and resolve.

For others, however, the idea that further global experimentation is a rational response to the accidental experiment we have set in motion is nonsensical, no matter how intentional, democratic or majestic we believe our actions could now be. While some are trying to rewrite the Age of Humans story as a celebratory tale of human power rather than a parable of human hubris, many of us respond to the ongoing scientific narrative of environmental losses and limits with visceral grief and fear. When it results in paralysis, such negative emotions can impede our productive engagement with the challenges faced, supporting the wellbeing idea that positive emotions such as optimism should be cultivated.[14] But it may be how we respond to our negative emotions more than the fact that we experience them that is the problem. Just as wallowing in despair or zoning out with anxiety are not effective coping mechanisms, ignoring or downplaying a problem so as to avoid the difficult feelings it generates is not ultimately helpful either.[15]

Our society is currently engaged in such avoidance behaviours, whether through effort or complicity. Part of the appeal of doing so is that it performs a celebrated aspect of our constructed human subjectivity: the ability to not only create new knowledge about the world but to 'choose to ignore that knowledge if it unsettled the mind', exercising our imagined autonomy from others (including non-humans).[16] We also, of course, choose to reject deep engagement with growing evidence about ecological destruction and planetary limits because it leaves us exposed to psychological and spiritual pain. In other words, it reduces our immediate wellbeing.

A growing number of writers suggest that exposing ourselves to such pain — to a decided lack of wellbeing — may be an unavoidable step to genuine engagement with our situation and thus our ability to improve our and others' wellbeing in the long term. Vulnerability to pain, both mental and physical, has been painted as what human progress is designed to avoid.[17] Current climate change initiatives, for example, are premised on identifying and eliminating vulnerability and establishing a 'secure' climate.[18] While important to a point, notably where vulnerability is imposed by some groups on others, it is possible that at a general level our 'lock down' mentality limits our understanding of the problem and our ability to imagine fruitful responses. Perhaps acknowledging that we are all inescapably and profoundly vulnerable to inhuman nature, despite our best efforts, and that nature is inescapably and profoundly vulnerable to our influence, despite our best (or near best) efforts, allows us to appreciate the deeply perforated character of the lines that divide the human and non-human worlds and the impossibility of achieving a stable and secure state. Perhaps we need to go beyond our existing ambition of protecting ourselves from nature and nature from us. To jointly shape for the better the transformations ahead, perhaps we

need instead a planetary scale, post-humanist goal of collective wellbeing or even, more dynamically, a planetary post-humanist goal of ongoing well-*becoming*.

Endnotes

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2 For a useful overview of recent science on the Anthropocene see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene and for more information see three new journals on the topic: *Anthropocene* (http://www.journals.elsevier.com/anthropocene/), *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene* (http://www.elementascience.org/), and *The Anthropocene Review* (http://anthropocenerev.blogspot.co.uk/).

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17 N Clark, *Inhuman nature: sociable life on a dynamic planet,* Sage, London, 2011.

18 S Dalby, 'Biopolitics and climate security in the Anthropocene', *Geoforum*, vol. 49, 2013, pp. 184–192.