

The affliction of human supremacy

This article dissects the motivations behind and consequences of the worldview of anthropocentrism, or human supremacy. Firstly, the author presents the just-so stories arising from the notion that the impact of humanity stems from our species' essence. Instead, the author argues, it is socio-cultural conditioning – specifically, the human-supremacist credo propagated by the dominant culture – to which we must turn in order to properly understand humanity's impact. Next, the typical beliefs arising from human supremacy are exposed, as are examples of its products: ideational and physical displacements. The author also discusses the wisdom of limitations, the danger of shifting ecological baselines and general ignorance of the current mass extinction event. Finally, after cautioning against the cult of techno-fixes, a brighter future is presented, which would be made possible by rejecting the human-supremacist credo.

A 2013 *Economist* article titled “Robochop: An Automated Jellyfish Exterminator Takes to the Sea” reported a problem: innumerable jellyfish clogged the pipes of a Swedish nuclear power plant, forcing it to shut down. The article also reported a solution: the deployment of a fleet of killer robots that turn jellyfish into mush. These devices follow a lead robot, and working in formation can chop up to 900 kilograms of jellyfish an hour.

Here's a two-word rejoinder to this techno-fix 'solution': *how disturbing.*

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In facing the huge ecological problems we have created, we encounter a notion that the impact of humanity stems from our nature – from our species' essence. There are negative and positive versions of this belief. The negative version asserts that humans are greedy, selfish and aggressive by nature. Or, along the same lines, that the human impact is an expression of a 'Darwinian' process, and that like any other multiplying species with nothing to check its growth, human beings are over-exploiting the environment and heading for a self-inflicted crash.

By contrast, the positive version of human nature as underlying driver of planetary impact insists that we are after all special, perhaps even god-like. But so far, this storyline continues, humans have been like reckless gods, so we need to get better at being all-powerful; above all, we need to use our science, technology, and managerial skills to put our problems behind us. Then humanity can get on with its destiny as a truly distinguished species.

In this article I direct the spotlight on anthropocentrism – or what I prefer to call human supremacy – as a way of getting around the pitfalls of both these views about human nature. The pitfall of the negative view is that it inclines us to shrug our shoulders in the face of humanity's uncontrolled expansionism, and let nature (supposedly) 'red in tooth and claw' take its inevitable course. The pitfall of the positive view is its implicit or open invitation to embrace the colonization of the planet and the domination of nature as humanity's manifest destiny.

But focusing our critical gaze on human supremacy shifts attention away from various just-so stories about human nature to the far more relevant issue of socio-cultural *conditioning*. We must focus on the paramount role of the human-supremacist

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About this article

This piece is taken from a forthcoming book edited by Trevor Goward and entitled *Speak to the Wild: Gaia in Mind* (<https://is.gd/nMLWMI>), intended as a hand-up for Millennials attempting to come to terms with a world much diminished and a future much compromised by decisions still being made, above all, by their forebears in the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations. The book will be published by Regina University Press in 2018. The piece has been edited minimally for house style.

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credo that the dominant culture propagates: the credo that affirms that human beings are superior to all other life forms and entitled to use them.

In our time the human supremacy complex has come to manifest as three invisible, widespread beliefs: that the Earth belongs to humanity; that the planet consists in resources for the betterment of people; and that human beings are ‘obviously’ superior to all other species. These beliefs are invisible in the sense that they are rarely explicitly stated. Yet they are clearly discernible as the underlying assumptions according to which people act in the biosphere.

The invisible operation of this belief system is the consequence of a long history of anthropocentrism – a history that reaches back to classical antiquity and has its roots in the birth of civilization. We are the inheritors and products of this history. Our impact on the biosphere derives from this supremacist legacy – and not from any inherent demonic flaws or god-like attributes of human nature.

To look at the legacy of human supremacy is to zoom in at who and what have been displaced to the periphery: namely, indigenous people (‘uncivilized’ people), wild non-humans and wild nature overall. The displacements can be grouped in two broad categories. First, there are the *ideational displacements*, involving belittling ideas about non-humans, about so-called savages and about the wild. Such ideas have long enjoyed cultural pre-eminence. Second, there are the *physical displacements*, having to do with geographical conquests that have exterminated and dislocated others.

Ideational displacements are tied to a leading motif in Western thought that contemplates the phenomenon of the human by posing the question, “How are human beings *different* from other species?” Political scientist John Rodman called this pervasively posed question the Differential Imperative, and identified it as the Western cultural proclivity for searching and acclaiming those characteristics that ostensibly distinguish the human from all other life forms.

There has been no shortage of proposed distinguishing attributes: reason, language, morality, civilization, technology and free will, among others. These attributes have been offered again and again as traits of human distinction. They have also enjoyed foundational status in hierarchical narratives about life that have dominated in the history of Western civilization.

The most enduring of such narratives, threading through very different traditions of thought, has been the Great Chain of Being, with man at the top, minerals at the bottom – and we all know how to fill the space between. This hierarchical order has not only been about the nature of being (what philosophers call ontology), but it has also imposed a moral order sanctioning man’s unrestrained use of everything supposedly beneath him.

The physical displacements are all too familiar. Before the civilized conqueror, forests have given way, and so have grasslands and wetlands, and rivers and lakes, and more recently the seas. Wild animals have been killed, enslaved, forced to remote and shrinking areas, and driven to regional or total extinction. Indigenous people have been labeled ‘savages’ or ‘animals’ and endured genocides and subjugations.

Human supremacy is not just a worldview, not just a story about how things are: it is a *lived* worldview. It constitutes an actionable credo that has carved the world we inhabit, both mentally and physically. For a snapshot of what that worldview is capable of, consider the 19th century takeover of the American Plains. Neither supremacist ideas nor technological power, by themselves, can explain the brutality with which the buffalo, the Plains Indians, the prairie species and the grasslands themselves were treated. But the alliance between the superiority delusion and the technical prowess of the civilized conqueror, the *lived* worldview of human supremacy, sheds light on this and so many other crimes civilization has committed against the living world.

So far I have covered the ideational and physical displacements that human supremacy has effected. I turn to briefly

consider what this lived worldview does to *human beings* who come under its spell. I touch on two momentous consequences for humanity: firstly, the inability to discern any reason for limiting expansionism; and secondly, the loss of appreciation and gratitude for the planet's stupendous richness and beauty.

On the first point, it needs to be said that the wisdom of limitations belongs to peoples who respect their non-human and human neighbours. It is that respect that gives rise to restraint. But the worldview of human supremacy extinguishes respect for neighbours and for their homes by constructing and circulating disparaging beliefs about them: either they do not morally count, or they are inferior, or they are nothing but 'resources', or (usually) all of the above. Thus, the conditioning of the human into a culture that has declared itself superior and entitled precludes the arising of restraint that comes from respect, from caring, and from a desire to fit in rather than take over. Non-stop expansionism is thus effectively *built into* the worldview of human supremacy.

Today, the absence of limitations, of restraint, is a rampant malady all around us. It has become a kind of madness. We see the madness in the normalized violence of factory farms, in the trashing and biodepletion of the seas, in the drive to dam the rivers of the world, in the rendering of whole landscapes in pursuit of fossil fuels, in the non-stop 'harvesting' of carnivores and in the insane trading of rainforests for crop plantations and cattle ranches. We see the absurdity of human supremacy and its descent into madness in 'rational' solutions like Robochop.

Beyond the inability to discern any reason for limitations, humanity has also blindsided itself to the loss of so much of the natural world. In the words of critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Men pay for the increase in power with alienation from that over which they exercise power." This is as true of human relationships as it is of the relationship between humanity and the more-than-human world.

A phenomenon profoundly indicative of this alienation is what is known as the shifting ecological baseline. Ecological impoverishment has generally increased with each generation, yet each generation takes the impoverished condition they find as 'normal'. Ever since wild beings have ceased being neighbors, neither their presence nor their local or regional disappearance has, for the most part, warranted recording. Amnesia about the living world is the existential condition that we have reaped in exchange for the supremacist exercise in power over the natural world. Another pinnacle indicator of human alienation is the ongoing invisibility of the mass extinction episode underway. Mass extinction remains publicly largely unknown, little understood and rarely talked about.

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Recent decades have witnessed humanity's dawning recognition of the dangerous side effects of expanding civilization: a sense of big trouble mounting and more trouble coming our way. Yet what is the prevailing response? Do we see a trend to confront the historical legacy of human supremacy – its displacements, extinctions, lack of restraint, alienation from the living world and ecological amnesia?

Not to date. No mainstream politician, media or non-governmental organization has called out the anthropocentric worldview. Rather, the prevailing response to ecological challenges has been a riff on the human supremacist storyline: We are the resourceful race; the technological magicians; the God species. Such are the exhortations we hear nowadays.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the standard approach to solving the enormous problems of our time is piecemeal and technological. Here are some high-profile examples:

- Shortages of freshwater will be tackled with desalinization or by redirecting entire rivers.
- Diminishing fossil fuels will be countered with extreme technologies that extract them from deep sediments, mountaintops and deforested landscapes.

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- In the near future, algae, switchgrass or some other biomass will be repurposed for fuel.
- If climate disruption gets out of hand, maybe geo-engineering will save the day.
- Industrial civilization and consumer society will be sustained and globalized via nuclear fission or fusion technologies.
- Adequate food? That will be secured by genetically engineering crops and animals, among other innovations.
- As wild fish become depleted, we can just escalate fish factory farms.
- And... when jellyfish clog up nuclear or desalinization power-plant pipes, we'll deploy high-tech robots to cut them into bits. (Never mind that the jellyfish blooms today are a direct consequence of the destruction of the ocean.)

When we consider all these approaches as a whole, we can discern that they are so many examples of the *one* chosen way of framing all problems. A way of framing that not only keeps the spotlight on human ingenuity to solve everything, but also invites admiration for that ingenuity. Most importantly, the piecemeal-technological frame diligently avoids challenging

human expansionism; on the contrary it seeks to make the human sprawl over the biosphere sustainable. It holds fast to the three overriding assumptions of human supremacy: that the Earth belongs to humanity, that the planet consists of resources for the betterment of people, and that human beings are obviously superior and entitled *vis-à-vis* all other species.

I close this brief article with a question: What possibilities will open when we finally choose to refuse the credo of human supremacy? Another way of life will emerge into view when we embrace another worldview to live by. Namely: that Earth is a community of unique and exquisite beings, places and cultures; that the planet inhabited with restraint and respect is abundant for our material sustenance and ravishing for our spirit; and that the more-than-human world, from singing whales to networking fungi, abounds in diverse forms of intelligence, awareness and mind. ■

Notes

This article has been adopted from Eileen Crist's presentation, "Confronting Anthropocentrism", delivered at the Teach-In meeting *Techno-Utopianism and the Fate of the Earth*, October 2014, New York City, NY, USA.

Accompanying artwork

Tornado abstract

by Nicola Woodham

Higher-resolution version:
<https://is.gd/ecoartwork>

About the artwork: Digital image (2017). For more information about this artwork, see the description on page 83 of Nicola's other piece in this issue.

