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KEEPING THE WILD

AGAINST THE DOMESTICATION OF EARTH

Ptolemaic Environmentalism

EILEEN CRIST

KEEPING THE WILD: AGAINST THE DOMESTICATION OF EARTH

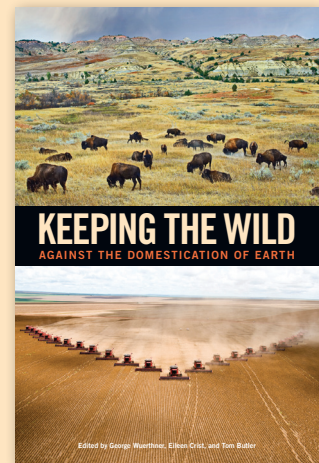
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THE ANCIENT GREEK WORD *oecumene* came into broad circulation in the Hellenistic era to refer to the inhabited world. It was a world that stretched from the Mediterranean basin to India, and from the Caucasus mountains to the Arabian Peninsula, encompassing diverse peoples and cultures connected via trade routes and empire building, alliances and conquests. By “the inhabited world,” *oecumene* of course meant the world inhabited by people. What the concept implied by exclusion, by what it passed over in silence, is that nonhumans do not inhabit. Only people are inhabitants, while animals, plants, and the natural communities they create merely exist in certain places—until they are forced to make way for, or be converted to serve, the *oecumene*.

Oecumene stands out as one of the first human imperialistic concepts. It is an idea constituted through omitting the actions that realize it—the appropriation of the natural world—presenting its meaning instead in a positive register: “the world inhabited by people.” It suggested a kind of protoglobalization, since *oecumene* included a cosmopolitan terrain.¹ Indeed, through its later linguistic transformation into “ecumenical” (meaning universal), *oecumene* foreshadowed globalization—humanity’s planet-wide occupation and the obliteration of the wild that the concept implied and through which it was realized.

Oecumene can be characterized as a “crystallization of culture,”² a significant sign of the lodging of anthropocentrism into language and thereby into broadly shared patterns of thought. It indicates that human beings, since civilization’s beginnings, have proclaimed the separate and special prerogative of the human. For generations untold, people have been inheriting this belief system and living by its compass, through cultural constellations of concepts, philosophies, theologies, and theories, until ultimately—by such serial, ideological sedimentations over the course of many centuries—the anthropocentric belief system has acquired the foundational status of “commonsense.” This belief system certainly has a different valence for different individuals and cultures. But broadly speaking, it professes that human beings, by virtue of the ostensible special nature of their consciousness and skills, are essentially distinct from other species, superior in their form of being (which includes, among other things, the ability to reason, foresee their own death, and terraform via technology), and entitled primacy with respect to having their interests met prior to all else. Anthropocentrism thus constructs an existential apartheid between, on the one hand, humans as a distinctive species-being with special privileges and, on

the other, all other life forms regarded, more or less, as the usable or displaceable “merely living.”³

Anthropocentrism’s entrenchment accounts for its pervasiveness and apparent naturalness, yet it is not beyond the reach of critical inquiry, dissection, and refutation. To inquire into anthropocentrism is to ask what kind of belief system it is. The unquestioned conviction with which people uphold the anthropocentric credo belies its characterization as mere belief, because it is in the nature of belief to be open to questioning and relinquishment in the face of a better alternative. At the same time, to call anthropocentrism a kind of folk knowledge—that we *just know* humans are different and have special entitlements, by the sundry evidence all around us—is to normalize an understanding of the human which the evidence all around us surely reflects only because humans have *made* that evidence, through actions that their sense of specialness has inspired and informed, to do so. We find ourselves then in the awkward conceptual space of a “belief system”—that of anthropocentrism as I sketched it above—which cannot be convincingly characterized as either mere belief or certain knowledge.

To be open to discerning the historically constructed and reconstructed character of anthropocentrism—its achieved legitimacy as a matter of conquest and often violence, and not a result of the rightful prerogative, or nature, of the human; its commonsensical entrenchment as a corollary of the erasure of the nonhuman (physical obliteration, discursive belittlement, or the simple invisibility of the vanquished at all levels of perception); its victory as a perhaps once-avoidable, but increasingly inescapable, historical course which has been entraining a time of reckoning (the time when *oecumene* would be all there is to see)—to be open to discerning these qualities of anthropocentrism that inquiry makes available, thereby seeing it in a novel, non-commonsensical light, is to understand that it may compellingly be described as “false knowledge.”

False knowledge is a most obstinate species of belief, for it tends to strongly resist dislodging. There exist notable examples of false knowledge systems, akin to the credo of anthropocentrism in the unswerving conviction with which they were held and the enticements of grandeur that underpinned them: namely, the knowledge that the Earth is the center of the universe around which planets, Moon, and Sun revolve; and also the knowledge that humans were specially created in the image of God. Of the same epistemic status and kin content is simply

knowing—deeply and almost irrefutably—that humans are different, special, and always come first. Indeed, it is this conviction that partially grounded the long-standing knowledge systems of Earth-centered astronomy and creationism, for what all three false ways of knowing have in common is self-glorification. When Nicolaus Copernicus wrote the tract that would refute Ptolemaic astronomy, he let the manuscript sit, virtually unread, on his desk for (at least) nine years.⁴ Charles Darwin kept his knowledge of the fact of evolution secret for twenty-one—and when he shared it with his botanist friend Joseph Dalton Hooker, he described the moment of confidence as akin to “confessing murder.” These stories convey the following: Standard belief systems, even if highly respected and securely ensconced, can be interrogated; but false knowledge is confronted only at one’s peril.

To characterize anthropocentrism as a (false) way of knowing is another way of saying that it describes *reality* for most people. And herein lies all the power that anthropocentrism claims. It possesses the moral power of always prioritizing human needs and desires. It provides the economic and political power of appropriating whatever humans can use from the natural world—from oceans, forests, rivers, grasslands, coasts, wildlife, domestic animals, genomes, or the crust of the Earth—by making the sources themselves invisible except in relation to our use of them. Anthropocentrism creates the ontological power to elide the acts of taking *as* acts of taking, through their ceaseless (small-to-mega) enactments as unremarkably ordinary. And, finally, through the power of its commonsensical standing, anthropocentrism keeps people under the spell of all of the above. For the dominant mindset, with nary a conscious thought, such is the real world: We came, we saw, we conquered. And to question this reality—the reality of human empire—places one outside, or at the margins, of every human club: academic, political, religious, or cultural. So while in the modern secular era questioning political regimes, religious dogmas, power structures, and even scientific theories or facts is kosher and often praiseworthy, questioning human empire is not. Questioning that particular reality will earn one certain unsavory labels. (And challenging that reality through activism can nowadays land one in prison or dead.)

Labels: for example, that you are being *unrealistic*. Or romantic. Juvenile. Probably misanthropic.⁵ Environmental thinkers and activists with deep-ecological leanings, who have countered the human regime on Earth with the ideals of biotic membership and biospherical equali-

tarianism, have been called all these names. Recently their perspective has been proclaimed dead, dysfunctional, or passé. But while such labels impress with their dismissive power, we need not be led astray by that power—for it does not reflect on the sobriety of questioning human domination, but rather evidences the tremendous sway of that domination backed doubly by the authority of history and by certain almighty material interests that be. The establishment of human domination—with the penetration of anthropocentrism’s myriad tendrils into the lifeworld, not to say into economic, political, and institutional power structures—means that those who question its legitimacy cannot be given audience but will invariably, for the time being, be written off. For it comes down to this: The ideational and institutional schemata of human privilege have long been championed by a dominant civilization, which has carved planetary reality to reflect the cult of human specialness, such that between the Scylla of anthropocentric ideas and the Charybdis of global terraforming, the human mind has virtually zero degrees of freedom to think outside the box of Earth takeover and self-arbitrated rule.

Be that as it may, after millennia of the empire’s march are the consequences. The consequences are called the Sixth Extinction. They are called climate change, ocean acidification, and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. They are called large-scale deforestation and desertification. The consequences are called 400 marine dead zones worldwide. They are called 90 percent of the big fish in the oceans are gone, and “empty forest syndrome.” The consequences are called the stifling of animal migrations and the constriction of wild species’ home ranges. They are also called the closing of the human heart to the suffering of farm animals. The consequences are called ecological amnesia, on the one hand, and a widening wave of grieving for lost beings and places, on the other. Today the whole planet is the oecumene and what the latter concept started out by implicitly erasing—the reality that nonhumans *do* inhabit and have equal prerogative to flourish here as we do—has become manifest by time, the revelator, as a nonhuman holocaust that is not even permitted to be called one. If at the heart of this juggernaut lies human self-appointed rule, then are we not called to take aim?

Neo-greens choose sustaining human dominion

Far from taking aim, a twenty-first-century vocal contingent of environmentalism—referred to variously as post-environmentalism, new environmentalism, eco-pragma-

tism, and eco-optimism, and often allied with the recent pitch to rename our geological epoch the *Anthropocene*—is disinclined from disputing human domination. Instead, it opts for the realistic work of *damage control* and of reforming the ways humans exercise planetary charge. Neo-greens, as I will refer to the exponents of this platform, seek to redress the adverse consequences of our impact while refraining from challenging the historical impulse toward Earth's occupation; and they often endeavor to recast the human presence in a more sanguine light.

The neo-green platform admits that there are serious environmental problems to grapple with, but the humanization of the planet is not one of them—let alone their root cause.⁶ The problems are certain harmful side effects (most especially) of industrial civilization, with climate change usually considered the gravest. But the disposition of civilization to use the Earth as though it were deeded as human private property is left unchallenged and treated in the quotidian modality of “normal.” Some neo-greens, recognizing the possibility that biophysical limits may have been (or might soon be) breached by human excesses, seek to identify and circumscribe planetary boundaries for key parameters in order to sustain a global environment that provides “a safe operating space for humanity” to continue its onward, if reformed, march.⁷

A critical mission of the neo-green agenda is to contain, mitigate, adapt to, or technically solve any consequences of civilization that might backfire, while essentially preserving the impetus of civilization's expansionism, and even celebrating its future extraterrestrial ventures.⁸ The Earth's colonization is not portrayed as the exercise of power over the biosphere to serve human interests (and especially the interests of elites), but as a sign of the human race's godlike stature. Turning virtually the entire globe into “the inhabited world” showcases a superlative quality of the human, rather than manifesting the cumulative outcome of long centuries of dominating nature by the lights of a human supremacist worldview. Famously, in the words of Stewart Brand, we are as gods,⁹ and—in the interests of keeping our planet a workable stage for our unfolding destiny—we have to get good at it.¹⁰

Getting good at being god involves making the takeover of the planet sustainable.¹¹ To that effect one requirement is sound global management of natural resources. While the idea of “wilderness”—a conceptual and pragmatic roadblock to such management, as well as to the legitimacy of constituting nature qua resources—is tirelessly assailed by the neo-green platform, the concept of “natural

resources” (and kin cultural crystallizations of the anthropocentric credo) is left unpacked, as though its patently sensible import puts it beyond deconstructive exegesis.

Besides sound resource management, also imperative for addressing risks—such as resource depletion (for example, freshwater) or sink overload (for example, dangerous levels of greenhouse gases)—is the deployment of technological inventions and solutions, with special emphasis on cutting-edge technologies. (Genetic engineering and geoengineering are prominent examples). The appeal to cutting-edge technologies accomplishes the double task of offering promissory notes (which, if empty, no one will be accountable for) and of seizing ownership of the future by extending the exercise of technical power to address problems while simultaneously avoiding reflection on humanity's power-driven mode of operation and on the available choice of a more humble path. A predilection for the technological not only shuns wrestling with human planetary politics—in which everything from mountaintops to underground shale and from genomes to climate are treated as our rightful turf—but, at least tacitly, fortifies that planetary politics which tends to enforce its regime via technological means.

Alongside sound management and technological approaches, the neo-green agenda also embraces the surveillance of natural systems so as to scientifically monitor chemical, physical, and biological phenomena with the aim of maintaining or enhancing humanity's prospects. These interconnected strategies (management, technology, and surveillance) involve upgrading and fine-tuning the rationalization of technical means to serve human ends, such that current challenges, especially those which are civilization-threatening, can be grasped as an opportunity to veer ourselves out of danger and toward a more secure and greener human empire. “We can only hope,” according to geographer and Anthropocene proponent Erle Ellis, “that human systems will continue to evolve in their capacity to create and sustain the biosphere we want and need.”¹²

The strategy of creating and sustaining a human-ruled biosphere reaffirms the legitimacy of anthropocentrism, avoids interrogating our relationship with the biosphere and its whole ensemble of life as an ethical matter, and resolutely eschews confronting global civilization as a totalitarian system on Earth.

As alluded to above, neo-greens recast a dominant human presence as not-so-dire-a-prospect after all. According to this view, mourning the loss and depredation

of the wild keeps us from appreciating the beauty that is part of all kinds of landscapes, including human-shaped ones; and obsessing over the exploitation and conversion of the natural world leaves us unable to recognize that nature is resilient and constantly changing anyway. Such environmental revisionism redefines humanity's impact as just another biogeological moment of Earth's history—and even a remarkable one; and it endeavors to banish the environmental blues by extending a more optimistic welcome to humanity's decisive presence. The metaphor of "garden" (or of "gardened planet") is invoked to envision the present and future world—tidy in some places, overgrown in others, but still beautiful, fecund, rambunctious, and ever in flux. This global garden in the making will not be, to borrow the words of ecologist Peter Kareiva (and his colleagues), "a carefully manicured and rigid one" but instead will be a tangle of natural ecosystems along with lands for food production, mineral extraction, urban centers, and so on.¹³ The human-dominated era opening indefinitely before us can be an epoch, in Ellis's words, "ripe with human-directed opportunity."¹⁴ It is a world that, if we cannot bring ourselves to embrace it, we can at least resign ourselves to. For "while there is nothing particularly good about a planet hotter than our ancestors ever experienced—not to mention one free of wild forests or wild fish—it seems all too evident that human systems are prepared to adapt to and prosper in the hotter, less biodiverse planet that we are busily creating."¹⁵

The state of the world captured via the garden metaphor sounds innocuous enough. But to invoke a different metaphor from popular culture, opting for the gardened-planet image is like taking the blue pill, instead of the red one, from Morpheus's extended hand—choosing "the blissful ignorance of illusion over the painful truth of reality."¹⁶ The painful reality of Matrix-planet is that it will be chock-full of industrial agricultural checkerboards and grazing lands; factory farms; industrial fish-farm operations; industrial energy landscapes; theme parks and resorts; highway systems, roads, and parking lots; billions of cars and other vehicles; and sprawling cities, as well as suburban, exurban, and rural settlements; malls; landfills; airports; and beachfront development. Global trade and travel, with their 24/7 traffic of already huge quantities of stuff, will escalate enormously—as will the entropy of nature conversion, biodiversity loss, and pollution that accompany them.¹⁷ The presence of humans will be palpable everywhere in this world devoid of any blank spots on the map—a world used, managed, monitored, gridded, and

reduced to being knowable, with the map itself eventually turned into the territory. Thus, opting for Morpheus's red pill, the planet's ecological and existential predicament is plain, if painful, to see: "Gardened planet" is a euphemism for colonized Earth. And humanity is not penning another interesting chapter of natural history, but heralding the end of a sublime one—so long as we stay the course toward a coming world of 9, 10, or more billion people, running a global capitalist economy, and governing by the conceit that this planet is human real estate. To paraphrase author John Gray, the horror we should flee is making such a humanized world in which humans encounter only reflections of themselves.¹⁸

The view that humanity is an integral part of Earth's natural history, and that through our unique powers we are creating new expressions of nature, is a standard thread in the neo-green literature. This perspective on our shaping of the biosphere *naturalizes* the human impact—and usually in an offhanded manner: Because what is the human presence, after all, if not a manifestation of nature? According to environmental author Emma Marris, for example, since we know that ecosystems are never static, "this means that novel [anthropogenic or human-influenced] ecosystems, far from being a new phenomenon, simply represent the latest changes on a dynamic Earth."¹⁹ Similarly, environmental journalist Fred Pearce asserts that constant change is a natural aspect of the world; "humans may have dramatically speeded that up, but novelty is the norm."²⁰

And yet, the tack of naturalizing humanity's impact is profoundly contestable, because people (at both an individual and a cultural level) are capable of engaging in very different kinds of relationship with nonhuman nature and the Earth. I submit that far from humanity's impact being "natural," its character supervenes from a species-supremacist, actionable belief system that only recently has a minority of human beings awakened to and recoiled from. With respect to Western civilization—now dominating human affairs—from classical antiquity, through Judeo-Christian theology, to dominant strands of modern scientific and political thought, its intellectual canon and legacy have been *overwhelmingly* anthropocentric.²¹ Anthropocentrism (or human supremacy) has shaped the dominant culture and has both orchestrated and legitimated a plundering human behavior toward the natural world.²² Such human behavior can be regarded as "natural" only by espousing a hard-core neo-Darwinian view of life as ruthless, competitive, and fundamentally self-cen-

tered. But this Western, pseudo-scientific view is narrow and suspiciously self-serving, and thus cogent only as an ideology and not a comprehensive empirical representation of the nature of life.

More than fallacious, naturalizing our planetary takeover is an unwitting form of myth-making, fully intertwined with the neo-green elevation of the human to godlike status and with its ardent desire to christen a slice of geological time after *anthropos*. Mythmaking is integral to the human imagination, yet this currently propounded mythology is but the latest spin on humanistic narcissism; it is a mythology we would be wise to exorcise. Naturalizing the disfigurement and impoverishment of the biosphere—and simultaneously elevating this particular effect as stemming from humanity’s power to create new expressions of nature—is a move accomplished by dehistoricizing the human: “The history of the concept of man is never examined. Everything occurs as if the sign ‘man’ has no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit.”²³ To inquire into humanity’s anthropocentric mode of operation as socio- and psycho-historically constituted is to disclose that it is merely *one* constructed meaning of the human; such disclosure opens a horizon within which we become *free* to shift into the work of recreating ourselves and our way of life on Earth. This is a horizon of human freedom that cannot be forfeited without severely contracting the very scope of what it means to be human.

We are in danger of losing the freedom to remake ourselves as a compassionate and integral planetary member, if we embrace the pitch that humanity’s identity as planetary overlord is natural.

Concerning the neo-green appeal to the priority of social justice

It is neither facile analogy nor rhetorical ploy to urge questioning anthropocentrism in the same spirit of inquiry and conscience that Caucasian-centeredness has been challenged. Human species supremacy and white racial supremacy are profoundly similar and, in fact, overlapping systems of thought. White supremacy drew its power from claims of racial superiority that were perceived as entirely commonsensical; moreover, to secure its hegemony, it leaned into the even more “obvious” reality of human supremacy over all other species by portraying non-Caucasian races as akin to “lower forms of life” (especially animals such as apes and insects). Inequalities between human groups, on the one hand, and the grand hierarchy

of the human–nonhuman, on the other, have always been enmeshed, mutually supportive frameworks.²⁴

The neo-green perspective alleges concern about inequities between people and about the lot of the world’s poor. At the same time, it leaves standing the received hierarchy between humans and nonhuman nature—refusing to examine the troubled relationship between people and the natural world through the lens of justice. Issues of justice are reserved (in the time-honored Western intellectual tradition) for the human domain, and matters of social justice (the gap between the consumer classes and the poor) are judged as most immediately pressing. Environmental author Paul Hawken recently voiced the perspective of the primacy of social justice with the following appeal: “There is no question that the environmental movement is critical to our survival. Our house is literally burning, and it is only logical that environmentalists expect the social justice movement to get on the environmental bus. But it is the other way around; the only way we are going to put out the fire is to get on the social justice bus and heal our wounds.”²⁵ Kareiva and his colleagues pursue a similar thread of reasoning: “Most people worldwide (regardless of culture) welcome the opportunities that development provides to improve lives of grinding poverty. . . . Conservation should seek to support and inform the right kind of development—development by design, done with the importance of nature to thriving economies foremost in mind.”²⁶ Environmental analysts Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus are optimistic about the prospects: “By 2100, nearly all of us will be prosperous enough to live healthy, free, and creative lives. Despite the claims of Malthusian pessimists, that world is both economically and ecologically possible. But to realize it, and to save what remains of the Earth’s ecological heritage, we must once and for all embrace human power, technology, and the larger process of modernization.”²⁷

What such analyses choose to ignore is that poverty has long been a social reality arising from civilization’s peculiar relationship with the natural world: namely, of viewing nature as a container of coveted resources that can be appropriated (through the exercise of some form of power or other) for the creation of what we have come to call wealth. From time immemorial, just as today, the underclass and the powerless have been forcibly limited from accessing resources for their own material advantage. It is thus injustice toward the more-than-human world—stripping it of its intrinsic being and value, and turning it into being-for and value-for people (“resourc-

es”)—that constitutes the foundation of social injustice and inequality.

Yet that foundation remains largely invisible, because a critical dimension of humanity’s self-awarded entitlement to use nature as we will has *also* been to make it taboo to regard our relationship with the natural world as *having anything to do* with matters of justice or injustice. Thus the anthropocentric credo, today buoyed along through such ideas as “resources,” “natural capital,” “ecological services,” “working landscapes,” and the like—ideas specifically indebted to the erasure of any *intrinsic* modality (ontological or evaluative) of the nonhuman realm—is left untouched, as is its plainly colonialist vocabulary. At the same time, the solution to social injustice is portrayed as the “democratic” (ever the buzzword) sharing of planetary loot, loot described more politely through such commonplace concepts as those listed above. The poor will be lifted from their dire plight, so goes the promise, as the natural world becomes sustainably degraded for the benefit of all people. But as I now turn to argue, the problem with this solution to social injustice is that it will not work; and if it were to work, it could hardly be called justice.

Social relations between people do not transpire in a vacuum, despite the cult of humanity’s long-cultivated fancy that the natural world is a stage for the grand show of human affairs. It is within the context of the dominant relationship between humanity and Earth that social relations have become constituted as material, normative, and historical realities. As long as the living world is construed as a suite of resources to be seized or converted, human relations will tend to manifest the corollaries of this materialized belief: There will be competition, exploitation, corruption, struggle for access and control, posturing, and conflict over all manner of resources. Systematic distortions of human relations are inextricably coupled with the resourcist mindset—they are supported and inflamed by the relentlessly enacted regard of the natural world as a domain-to-be-used for human profit or advancement. The source of the disparity between the haves and the have-nots thus lies in the conception-*cum*-treatment of Earth’s living beings and nonliving things as *resources*—a corrupt concept which continues to masquerade as merely a descriptive word.

While its pervasiveness normalizes it, it is worth investigating what kind of relationship to the biosphere this word signals. “Resources” is an abstraction for referring to a multitude of things in the living and nonliving world, while referring, as such, to nothing in particular: Simply

put, it is a placeholder for designating the natural world in terms of its disposability for human needs, wants, desires, and whims. Thus, while seemingly an objective referent to things (oil, fish, soil, freshwater, and so on), the concept of resources reconfigures the natural world in terms of how it is usable, thereby entirely bypassing, and via its ceaseless use erasing, nature’s intrinsic standing—both as being and as value. Indeed, “natural resources” blocks human thought from *seeing* the natural world in its intrinsic light. “Resources” is thus a linguistic accompaniment of the assault on and excessive exploitation of the natural world. The transfiguration of the natural world into resources has come to shape human thought and action at such an encompassing level that people largely perceive the natural world through this single framework: of how it is usable and/or profitable.

In a world thus diminished, enslaved, or otherwise turned into means for human ends, social justice is pragmatically all but unachievable, because people (as well as entities such as corporations and states which are run, and embraced, by people) will inexorably be incited to do what it takes to possess the useful or money-spinning means: land, freshwater, territory, fisheries, fur, genes, oil, coal, natural gas, uranium, timber, wildlife (dead or alive), livestock, metals, and minerals. As long as these means remain the perceived conduit toward wealth, privilege, and the good life, the goal of social justice is likely to remain elusive.

But assume for the sake of argument that social justice is achievable on a planet of resources—a planet used, managed, and engineered to be productive for human beings. Let’s posit, along these lines, that humanity recognizes the folly of the unequal distribution of resources and decides to share the so-called commonwealth (the modern equivalent of the oecumene) fairly among all people. This thought experiment discloses the second reason that social justice is untenable without a radically new relationship between humanity and the more-than-human-world. Consider the following analogy: that Adolf Hitler had won the war and the Third Reich achieved global rule. People of Nordic descent established their dominion, while “inferior human stock” was exterminated, assimilated, or put to work; the Aryan race succeeded in founding its Golden Age, with its members enjoying, more or less equitably, all the amenities of the good life. Now map this thought experiment onto the achievement of a just world for all *humans* (regardless of race, ethnicity, class, caste, religion, gender, etc.), within a civilization built upon the subordination of the Earth’s nonhumans and the appropriation of

their oecumene (a.k.a. the wild)—a human world that, in order “to raise all ships,” required the unavoidable side effects of (mass?) extinction, global ecological depredation, and techno-managerial planetary oversight; required, in a word, an occupied planet. Does this scenario not describe a victorious Human Reich—with all its members partaking equitably of the world’s resources? Regarding such an advent of social justice, one might justifiably ask: What could the idea of justice possibly even mean at that point?

Social justice is not achievable as long as the natural world continues to be stripped of its intrinsic standing and reconfigured as a collection of resources. By virtue of the sorts of entities they are, resources not only encourage but also largely create the acquisitive mindset that undergirds human conflict, corruption, and injustice.²⁸ On the other hand, should people achieve greater material equity—while sustaining the anthropocentric representation of nature as made-for-humans—then social justice will come to pass at the price of planetary colonization, thereby evacuating the *very concept* of justice of any meaningful sense.

Earth is the origin and irreplaceable field of all human experience, the all-encompassing context of social life. Humanity’s rupture from the Earth community along with humanity’s takeover of the planet as an instrumental totality of objects-and-services-for-human-use have pathologized the human psyche in a way that will likely continue to prevent the healing of intra-human conflict. The ground for social justice and world peace is *literally* missing without Earth respected and restored as a living world and the rejection of the received hierarchy between humans and the rest of nature. Let us be clear about the magnitude of what is called for: the relinquishment of our fabricated, special and privileged identity.

It is a matter of becoming receptive to an idea whose time has come: that the Earth is not made for people, any more than it was made for the universe to frame itself around and for planetary bodies to circumambulate.

Saving the phenomena or revolutionary transformation?

The development of Ptolemaic astronomy originated around the time that the idea of oecumene had become pervasive; it offered a powerful model of the workings of the heavens that ruled people’s understanding of the universe, and of Earth’s place within it, for fourteen hundred years. A geocentric image was the unquestionable core of Ptolemaic astronomy—supported by the apparent

nature of the phenomena, namely, the seeming motion of planets, Moon, and Sun and the seeming stillness of the Earth. But since the Ptolemaic picture corresponded poorly with actual astronomical reality (as opposed to a perceived and promulgated geocentric reality) problems with the model’s predictions emerged and accumulated. These problems had to be solved—and so they were, but not by abandoning the geocentric picture and inquiring into alternatives. Instead, corrective mechanisms were affixed to the Ptolemaic model, such as “epicycles” which posited additional circular movements to a planet’s standard Earth orbit (thus explaining that planet’s “retrograde movement”). A number of corrective mechanisms (epicycles being but one) were able to explain—for a while—discrepancies between the dearly-held-onto geocentric model and actual observations.²⁹ As a consequence, over time, Ptolemaic astronomy became complicated and cumbersome, a proverbial Byzantine edifice, continuously reconstructed to sustain the Earth-centered gestalt and save the phenomena. But after a millennium and a half of laboring to make it hold, the central location of the Planet of the Humans had to be abandoned.

Neo-green environmentalism is holding onto its own version of Ptolemaic astronomy, namely, the core belief in the rightfulness or inevitability of a human-governed planet. Even as faith in human rule has soured, with oceans, forests, rivers, grasslands, species, and climate sacrificed to its bogus altar, the neo-green perspective seeks to add epicycle after epicycle to the model of human governance to keep it in place: nuclear power, bio-fuels, carbon capture and storage, and so forth to help stabilize levels of greenhouse gases; genetic engineering of crops and animals to solve the food crisis, the nitrogen and phosphorus overload, freshwater shortfalls, or what-have-you; geoengineering to cope with possible climate disruption, and eventually repurposed to adjust Earth’s thermostat to favorable settings; desalinization projects and massive wind, hydropower, and photovoltaic industrial operations to continue funneling water and sustainable energy to many billions of people; placing monetary values on biodiversity and ecosystem services, so the market might safeguard some remaining natural areas; “de-extinction” projects and synthetic biology for the supposed instatement of human-made biological diversity sometime in the future; and efficient management and recycling to keep the flow of raw materials feeding a globalized industrialism. In other words, whatever it takes, so that the planetary authority of the human need

not be confronted. The neo-green perspective would have us (enthusiastically or reluctantly) embrace a world that is massively complicated, mega-technological, engineered, risk-tending, used, biologically impoverished, overpopulated, and filled with (equitably shared) consumer stuff. The sole virtue of such a world is that it saves the historically bequeathed phenomenon of human rule.

There exists another path into the future, one which is more elegant, more beautiful, more ethical, and more becoming of the human spirit: on this path, wild nature—terrestrial and marine—is reinstated as the unbroken, rich-in-life tapestry within which human communities thrive in integration with their inhabited bioregions.

Humanity must move *out of the center* and let the Earth and its whole community of life flourish there. Moving out of the center means scaling back humanity's presence enormously: humanely reducing global population to a far lower level than it presently is; ending overproduction and the excesses of global trade; ending industrial food production, along with its ecological, ethical, environmental, and public health horrors; and ceasing to stifle the freedom and creative powers of nature by playing Lord Man. Perhaps most fundamentally, moving out of the center means disowning the human supremacy complex—its blindness to the stupendous intrinsic power of the natural world and to the madness of its own heart.

NOTES

1. On the idea of *oecumene* in the Hellenistic and Roman world, see F. Walbank, *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2, 8; D. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Time* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 85. For *oecumene* as a foreshadowing of globalization, see P. James, "Global Formation: From the *Oecumene* to Planet Exploitation," *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2006), 262–91.
2. Susan Bordo's (1977) expression. See S. Bordo, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture," in *Food and Culture*, ed. C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 226–50.
3. I believe I owe the phrasing to animal rights writer and activist Tom Regan; see his *Defending Animal Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
4. See Nicolaus Copernicus's famous "Letter to His Holiness Pope Paul III," published as the preface to the first edition of *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543): a remarkable document in endeavoring to placate the highest office of geocentric dogma, while also expressing great trepidation for "daring against the received opinion of mathematicians, and almost against common sense, to imagine some motion of the Earth." In A. M. Duncan, *Copernicus: On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976), 23–27.
5. Environmental "purists," opines columnist Margaret Wenthe in a recent stringing of labels, "have been terrible for environmentalism because they've alienated the public with their misanthropic, anti-growth, anti-technology, dogmatic, zealous, romantic, backward-looking message"; M. Wenthe, "Can Enviro-optimists Save the Movement from Itself?" *The Globe and Mail*, 20 April 2013. See George Monbiot's witty response to such name-calling in a recent *Guardian* publication; G. Monbiot, "I Love Nature. For This I am Called Bourgeois, Romantic—Even Fascist," *The Guardian* (8 July 2013).
6. "We've come through a period of finally understanding the nature and magnitude of humanity's transformation of the earth. Having realized it, can we become clever enough at a big enough scale to be able to maintain the rates of progress?" This quote from a Harvard biologist is a pithy, if bald-faced, representation of neo-green reasoning (cited in Andrew Revkin's *New York Times* report, aptly titled "Managing Planet Earth: Forget Nature. Even Eden is Engineered," *New York Times* 20 August 2002).
7. Key parameters, according to the planetary boundaries perspective, include anthropogenic nitrogen, greenhouse gases, and biodiversity loss. See J. Rockström et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Nature* 461, no. 24 (2009): 472–75; M. Lynas, *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011). Identifying specific boundaries that should not be transgressed is the other side of the conceptual coin of "maximum sustainable yield." In both cases the logic goes as follows: How much can we take from the natural world, or up to what threshold can we pollute and degrade, without threatening boomeranging repercussions? The motive is to eat the planet and have it too; or, to keep growing without collapsing. Exponent of planetary boundaries Mark Lynas is thus quick to differentiate "planetary boundaries" from the 1972 classic concept of "limits to growth": "The planetary boundaries concept does not necessarily imply any limit on human economic growth or productivity," he assures his readers (2011: 9).
8. This dream is taking the most immediately realizable form of aspirations to mine the Moon and nearby planets, given that no known life forms that could be exploited for human advantage exist within Earth's vicinity.

9. Ironically, the seemingly reasonable claim that human power is godlike is blind to its own entanglements with a monotheistic conception of a God, so improbably arrogant and callous, that the Gnostics unmasked him as an impostor of divinity. See H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958/1963). This is in agreement with professor John Gray's related point, "human uniqueness is a myth inherited from religion, which humanists have recycled into science." In J. Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 77.
10. S. Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto* (London: Viking, 2009); M. Lynas, *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011).
11. "In the Anthropocene we are the creators, engineers and permanent global stewards of a sustainable human nature" (emphasis added); E. Ellis, "Forget Mother Nature: This Is a World of Our Making," *New Scientist*, 14 June 2011. A similar idea is expressed by Marris: "We are already running the whole Earth, whether we admit it or not. To run it consciously and effectively, we must admit our role and even embrace it. We must temper our romantic notion of untrammelled wilderness and find room next to it for the more nuanced notion of a global, half-wild rambunctious garden, tended by us." E. Marris, "Ecology Without Wilderness: Tending the Global Garden We Call 'Nature,'" *The Atlantic*, 15 September 2011.
12. E. Ellis, "Anthropogenic Transformation of the Terrestrial Biosphere," *Philosophical Transactions A* 369 (2011): 1029.
13. P. Kareiva, R. Lalasz, and M. Marvier, "Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility," *Breakthrough Journal*, Fall 2011, pp. 29–37.
14. E. Ellis, "The Planet of No Return: Human Resilience on an Artificial Earth," *Breakthrough Journal*, (Winter 2012), <http://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/journal/past>.
15. Ibid.
16. See the entry about *The Matrix*: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_pill_and_blue_pill
17. M. Lenzen et al., "International Trade Drives Biodiversity Threats in Developing Nations," *Nature* 486 (June 2012): 109–12.
18. J. Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths*, 156.
19. E. Marris, "Ecology: Ragamuffin Earth," *Nature* 460 (2009): 450–53.
20. F. Pearce, "True Nature: Revising Ideas on What Is Pristine and Wild," *Yale Environment* 360 (13 May 2013). http://e360.yale.edu/feature/true_nature_revising_ideas...is.../2649/. Understating, in passing, the importance of the speed of change that humans are effecting is an enormous obfuscation. Most changes in nature are not catastrophically rapid, which is why biodiversity tends to build over geological time, with the emergence of new species slightly outpacing background extinction. See E. O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999/2010). Mass extinctions, rare in Earth's history, are caused by catastrophic events—humanity's rapidly occurring and sustained impact being the current one.
21. See E. Crist, "Ecocide and the Extinction of Animal Minds," in *Ignoring Nature No More: The Case for Compassionate Conservation*, ed. M. Bekoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 45–61.
22. Expressions such as "novel ecosystems" and neologisms such as *anthromes* may be viewed as Orwellian representations of the human reshaping of nature. Entitled human beings use what they want from ecosystems, while displacing or exterminating the parts that are in the way. For example, what European colonizers wanted to use from the North American prairie was its soil; everything else had to go, and ultimately of course so will the soil.
23. J. Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. K. Baynes et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 131.
24. An observation made by many authors. For example: T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: NBL, 1978); J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981/1996), chapter 2; M. Calarco, "Identity, Difference, Indistinction," *The New Centennial Review* 11 (2012): 46.
25. P. Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 190.
26. P. Kareiva, R. Lalasz, and M. Marvier, "Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility," pp. 35, 36.
27. M. Shellenberger and T. Nordhaus, eds., *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene* (Oakland, CA: The Breakthrough Institute, 2011 PDF e-book).
28. See Global Witness cofounder Charmian Gooch's fascinating 2013 TED talk on corruption surrounding natural resource global deals. She argues persuasively that it is not just "greedy" people in positions of power who are implicated in corruption schemes, but a global network of banks, corporations, and governments who become complicit and also profit. While Gooch clearly sees the systemic, multidimensional character of how corruption works, especially when profits of millions or billions of dollars are at stake, she misses corruption's obvious, and hence invisible, foundation—the acted-upon assumption that Earth's places and beings are "natural resources." See C. Gooch, "Meet Global Corruption's Hidden Players," TEDGlobal, July 2013. This bedrock assumption, to borrow historian Leo Marx's words, is "so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them" (1996: 204–05); in L. Marx, "The Domination of Nature and the Redefinition of Progress," in *Progress: Fact or Illusion?*, ed. L. Marx and B. Mazlish (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 201–18.
29. See T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 68–69.