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**Real Anthropocene Politics**

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This paper discusses parallels between the Anthropocene discourse and the realism v moralism debate in political theory. Central to realism is the claim that political philosophy should not be viewed simply as a form of ‘applied ethics’. Different versions of realism vary in plausibility but the central insight seems correct: politics is not well-understood as simple conformity to a prior, independently defined moral standpoint. This is something of a strawman however. When put too strongly realism overstates the dichotomy between morality and politics and the extent to which ‘moralists’ define moral standpoints independently of politics, and obscures the way ethics and politics may be intertwined without reducing to each other. The Anthropocene discourse also emphasises something true: the degree of human impact on the earth makes it impossible to view nonhuman nature as fully independent of humanity. But this can involve a strawman too: not all ‘traditional’ environmental thought and practice has that view of nature. Analogously to strong forms of political realism very strong forms of Anthropocene advocacy obscure the intertwining of humanity and nonhumanity. Yet such Anthropocene advocacy is also vulnerable to ‘realist’ critique of the ideological ramifications of its homogenising framework and recourse to strawmen.

**Political realism, strong and weak**

Over recent decades a critique of the allegedly excessive moralism of much Anglophone political philosophy has developed under the heading of ‘political realism’. This comes in different forms with different points of emphasis. It is useful to distinguish four interrelated components of the critique[[1]](#footnote-1). Firstly, much political philosophy distorts our understanding of politics by focusing on specific moral values (often justice) to the detriment of a range of ‘political’ values, such as legitimacy, order and stability. Secondly, moralistic political philosophy under-appreciates the extent to which the values it asserts as fundamental may be ideological. Thirdly, it under-appreciates the importance of strongly contextual forms of political judgement sensitive to concrete political conditions. This is badly served by abstract ‘grand theories’ apparently supposed to generate prescriptions for all political situations.

I will be touching on each of these issues, especially, towards the end the paper, the matter of ideology. But I take the central charge to be this fourth one: much political philosophy proceeds with little or no regard to the concerns of politics as a realm more or less *autonomous* from morality. It presents itself as applied moral philosophy, adopting a moral standpoint prior to politics which is then expected simply to conform to that standpoint. Bernard Williams, for example, criticises ‘political moralism’ for either regarding the political as a mere instrument of the moral, or for taking morality to constrain what politics ‘…can rightfully do. In both cases, political theory is something like applied morality’ (Williams 2005, p.2). In full moralist mode, then, political philosophy proceeds ‘unrealistically’ by ignoring features internal to ‘the political’ that aren’t a matter simply of ‘doing the right thing’ as defined by an independent moral standard.

The dichotomy here between morality and politics can be drawn more or less strictly, depending on the degree of autonomy the political is given from the moral or ethical[[2]](#footnote-2) (Rossi & Sleat, pp.690-3). Thus we can think of a ‘realism’ dimension at one end of which the logically strongest political realism (hereafter SPR) asserts full autonomy: moral normativity is unsuitable to politics, where specifically political forms of normativity hold sway. At the opposite end is pure political moralism, which regards politics as ideally a domain entirely of moral enactment or constraint. Lying between these two extremes weaker forms of realism don’t deny a place for morality in politics, but claim that political philosophy should give greater weight than it often does to the autonomy of distinctively political concerns and constraints. This is probably Williams’ view. I think weaker versions are the most defensible and their definitive central claim plausible: morality is hardly unimportant in politics, but political philosophy shouldn’t proceed *simply* as applied moral philosophy without regard to distinctively political concerns. I will shortly offer some reasons in favour of weaker political realism and argue that the figure of the political moralist is at least often of a strawman. I will then go on to discuss parallels with analogously strong forms of Anthropocene advocacy; analogous that is to SPR. Firstly though, it might be thought that I am myself setting up a strawman in talking about the strongest form of political realism as if it was actually held by anyone. Surely no one thinks that politics ought to be thought a completely autonomous domain where morality is altogether out of place? Maybe not. I am not committed to claiming that anyone does hold SPR in a fully unqualified form[[3]](#footnote-3); I am taking it as an ideal limit defining the end of a spectrum of views.

There are clearly strong and familiar reasons for preferring weaker forms of realism over SPR. One is motivated by sensitivity to our historical context as one of value pluralism and disagreement. The fact of pluralism and disagreement is a definitive problem of modernity and this is a reason *for us* not to identify political philosophy with a comprehensive ethical standpoint. Many are bound to disagree, and it is pointless to posit a merely theoretical consensus and derive normative political conclusions from that. On the other hand, although political thought is needed to consider how to accommodate pervasive disagreement and secure the legitimacy of coercive institutions despite it, it is difficult not to see this as a moral question as well as a political question.

Charles Larmore has usefully developed this point to suggest we move beyond realism versus moralism as an either/or contest (Larmore 2013, pp.279-80). Realists have part of the truth exactly because deep and widespread moral disagreement is a central feature of empirical politics. The import of this as a historical lesson, unavailable to the inhabitants of an ethically and culturally homogenous Aristotelian polis, for example, is that political philosophy must be significantly autonomous from moral philosophy (p.300). Matters of justice or the right are no less contentious than claims about the good, Larmore points out; consequently, a political philosophy focused only on conditions of legitimate authority in the face of moral conflict and disagreement is superior to one focused on ‘mapping the structure of the ideal society’ (p.289). Yet such central features of political life cannot be addressed without appealing to moral principles taken to be ‘antecedently valid’. To secure the (perception of the) legitimacy of a political system it is necessary to refer to principles (of whatever form) taken to be ‘right’ independently of the system itself. Thus the moralist also has part of the truth: the realist must take ‘some bearings from elements of morality’ (p.290) and so cannot adopt SPR. Although significantly autonomous from one another there is interplay between morality and politics, an intertwining in which neither side is ultimately fundamental.

Keeping the moral in play like this does not imply a view of political philosophy as merely applied morality. It does not necessitate reference ‘to *justice as a purely moral ideal* in the sense of defined in advance of any concern for how its requirements are to be made authoritative’ (Larmore, p.292, his emphasis). Nor indeed is thinking about justice as a ‘purely moral ideal’ mistaken. Consideration of who ideally is owed what, regardless of issues of legitimate coercion, is an important part of moral philosophy. What transforms it into *political* philosophy, for Larmore, is explicit explanation of the conditions under which moral ideals can be legitimately enforced (Larmore, p.295). That is, the moral questions are viewed as interacting with paradigmatically political questions.

Take also Adam Swift’s (2008) defence of ‘pure, context-free philosophical analysis’ of concepts such as justice. This, he says, has a crucial role in clarifying the values involved, their relations and relative weight, so as to inform the evaluation of options whose feasibility and methods of realisation are to be determined by the social sciences (pp.369ff). In Larmore’s terms the philosophical component of this division of labour looks like (non-political) moral philosophy. It might be interpreted as pure political moralism: philosophers analyse values as they are ‘in themselves’ and then social scientists determine if and how they can be realized in a given concrete political situation. Politics then looks like applied moral philosophy. But, as Swift points out, one can take the analysis of ‘fundamental’ principles of justice to be logically independent of issues of ‘feasibility’ and *also* think that normative theorising in the light of those principles should be ‘integrated with an appreciation of the empirical realities of one’s own society’ (p.371). This latter also informs ‘what ought to be done’, not simply the analyses and principles arrived at in de-contextualised abstraction.

Thus even someone who emphasises the role of political philosophy as context-free analysis need not think that the way to go is to formulate abstract principles and then ‘apply’ them to political reality regardless of the extent to which the latter matches the idealizing assumptions (compliance, ideal rationality and so on) employed in the former. Swift’s division of labour between abstract philosophising and empirical investigation may be drawn too sharply to be fully convincing. Still, the overall enterprise encompassing that division of labour embodies the belief that, in reality, the moral and political are intertwined. This is the point I want to emphasise. Notice two things about it:

Firstly, it is not merely a matter of stipulative definitions of the moral and the political (or of political, as against moral, philosophy). We don’t want to reduce politics to morality understood as an account of normative relations minus any considerations of power, coercion and so on. Nor do we want to reduce morality to politics understood as power relations minus any moral considerations. The moral and political are intertwined, each informing the other without being fully reducible to it. Secondly, *purity* is an important issue here. Consider again strong versus weak forms of the claim that politics is autonomous. SPR sees politics as altogether autonomous from morality, suggesting a picture of separation rather than intertwining. It posits a cleavage between ethics and politics by defining morality as *independent* from (even if not normatively prior to) politics no less than does the putative pure moralist. The weaker version of realism remains consistent with the intertwining of ethics and politics whereas the strong form serves this badly and obscures it. My larger point though, to which I will return shortly, is that there is a parallel between the latter and the strongest form of Anthropocene advocacy, which, I argue, does not well serve the non-reductive intertwining of humanity (society, culture) and nonhuman nature.

**Strawman political moralism**

Notice also that insofar as political realism presents the strongest form of moralism as a mainstream view in political philosophy it sets up a strawman. The picture of *purely* moralistic political philosophy is unconvincing[[4]](#footnote-4). For example, John Rawls and Robert Nozick, whose views and methods have done much to shape Anglophone political philosophy since the 1970s, might be supposed to count as arch-moralists, but neither of them does define a *purely* ethical standpoint *entirely* prior to any characteristically political considerations. One might argue that politics enters the starting points of their theories in the wrong way – say as something to be finally ‘fixed’ through a universalised normative framework that arbitrarily prioritises particular moral values. Nevertheless, political considerations are still there. Nozick’s infamous opening declaration in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* looks both deeply ethical *and* deeply political: ‘Individuals have rights and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). So strong and far-reaching are these rights that they raise the question of what, if anything, that state and its officials may do’ (Nozick 1974, p. ix). It might be deeply mistaken too of course; but this is hardly because it posits a ‘purely ethical’ perspective, entirely divorced from issues of political power and legitimacy, and *then* applies that to politics. If it is mistaken then this is perhaps partly because both its moral and political content are too ahistorical; abstracted too far from any actual intertwining of the ethical and political.

At least in ‘political’ liberal mode Rawls is less vulnerable to the charge of ahistorical universalism because he emphasises the historical contingency of his central commitments, as in his claim that centuries of political experience, especially of religious conflict and disagreement, make his ‘non-comprehensive’ conception of justice appropriate for modern liberal democracies, and capable of *stability* through time (Rawls 1996). His earlier work lacked that ‘political’ focus. Even so its guiding notions (including the ‘basic structure’ of interlocking social institutions considered as a structure of force that enables or constrains life chances) are not purely ethical notions lacking contact with political reality. Rawlsian political philosophy may well be vulnerable to other realist objections, for example in giving justice permanent priority and in being insufficiently aware of its own potentially ideological status. Perhaps it is indeed excessively moralistic. But the picture of Rawls as a philosopher who *first* works out a moral theory independently of any political considerations *and only then* turns to politics as the field of application of that theory, is a strawman.

**Strong Anthropocene Advocacy**

What has any of this to do with the Anthropocene? In my view there are interesting parallels, both in terms of matters of autonomy and the setting up of strawmen. Advocates of the Anthropocene idea claim that the scale, complexity and ubiquity of anthropogenic impacts on terrestrial nonhuman nature are such that we should take ourselves to be living in a new geological era – the Anthropocene. Moreover, this means that insofar as environmental thought and practice are underpinned by respect for or positive valuation of nonhuman nature taken to be autonomous from humanity then it needs to be re-thought. There is something in this, of course; just as there is in political realism. Everywhere on Earth is affected by human activity, such that our environmental situation is one of profound ‘socio-nature entanglement’ (Arias-Maldonado, 2015).

However, the degree of anthropogenic impact and the extent of the resulting human/nonhuman entanglement might be taken to negate the autonomy of nonhuman nature more or less completely as a defensible, or even intelligible, element of environmental concern. As in the case of political realism I will take the strongest or purest form of Anthropocene advocacy, which denies nonhuman autonomy altogether, to define the ideal end of a dimension. ‘Strong Anthropocene advocacy’ (SAA) approaches this. At the opposite end of the dimension is belief in the full autonomy of nonhuman (in the guise of ‘pure wilderness’, for example).

There are important differences between the realism/moralism debate and debates about the Anthropocene, of course, including regarding issues of autonomy. Where SPR stresses the autonomy of the political from the moral, the strongest SAA *denies* the autonomy of nature from humanity. But underlying this difference there is an important shared commitment. Neither has any truck with impure, relative or qualified autonomy: autonomy is pure or it is nothing[[5]](#footnote-5). As with SPR, I am not committed to claiming that anyone holds SAA in a fully unqualified form, though here more seem to come close, perhaps because of earlier ground-clearing by constructionist nature scepticism and the ‘end of nature’ debate[[6]](#footnote-6). Thus, according to ecologist and Anthropocene advocate Erle Ellis, ‘[f]rom a philosophical point of view, nature is now human nature; there is no more wild nature to be found, just ecosystems in different states of human interaction, differing in wildness and humanness’ (Ellis 2011a, p.1027). Assuming that ‘human nature’ here is intended as a contrast to nonhuman nature, the first part of this statement conforms to unqualified SAA and the second part then qualifies it somewhat.

There are of course very strong grounds for keeping relatively autonomous nonhuman nature in view. Certainly, concern for (relatively) nonhuman nature, and associated environmental ideas and practices do not require us to deny that the protection of remaining relatively wild nature and the protection of human interests are *themselves* profoundly entangled. Consider this principle: If x and y are entangled, and the preservation of the entanglement is important, then so is the preservation of both x and y also important, even though being wrapped up together in a complex entanglement neither x nor y are pure versions of themselves. Preservation of the intertwining of nonhuman nature and humanity is important; at least because of the dependence of humanity on the nonhuman elements of the entanglement. Therefore, the preservation of the (relatively) nonhuman nature component of the entanglement is also important. But now one might be tempted to put all the weight on the fact of humanity’s dependence here as a purely anthropocentric agenda-setting thought: forget the preservation of (relatively) nonhuman nature as a traditional goal *in its own right* and think instead of managing the environment in a mode at least closely approaching SAA, with environmental imperatives reduced to that of building a sustainable human(ised) nature: ‘We most certainly can create a better Anthropocene... The first step will be in our own minds. The Holocene is gone. In the Anthropocene we are the creators, engineers and permanent global stewards of a sustainable human nature’ (Ellis 2011b).

Here we see a parallel with SPR as insufficiently sensitive to a non-reductive picture of the intertwining of x and y: in the environmental case the aim to reduce all environmental imperatives to anthropocentric imperatives focused on remaining nature’s instrumental importance to humanity. Here sensitivity is badly served by a perspective that takes itself to be ‘realistic’ and yet is, to a significant extent, predicated on knocking down a strawman so as to present itself as the only real option, a matter simply of facts it would be irrational to deny and to which conformity is required.

**Anthropocene advocacy and strawman environmentalism**

For associated with stronger forms of Anthropocene advocacy is an apparently paradigm-shifting programme of environmentalism. Some of those most enthusiastic about the Anthropocene idea have commitments well-summarised by Piers Stephens in a review of a recent collection of papers by opponents of SAA (Wuerthner et al 2014). Such Anthropocene advocates[[7]](#footnote-7)

‘… attack traditional environmentalists as woolly-minded misanthropic Romantics obsessed with mythically pure wilderness, embrace the idea of humans as de facto planetary managers, repudiate the notion of nature’s fragility, support anthropocentrism and economic growth, and advocate partnerships with corporate capitalist institutions to maintain ecosystem services and human-managed landscapes so as to serve human aspirations.’ (Stephens 2016, p.121)

Some of these commitments pertain to the issue of ideology, to which I return below. For now, the point is that *insofar as* SAA is constituted by critique of ‘traditional environmentalism’ premised on concern for pure nonhuman nature (rather than, or as well as, constituted by a denial of nonhuman autonomy), then it is based on knocking down a strawman. I should emphasise again that not everyone caught up in the Anthropocene discourse holds these views and so counts as committed to SAA so constituted[[8]](#footnote-8). My concern here is with parallels between such SAA and SPR’s claim that political moralism misunderstands the real character of the political. For SAA, *when partly constituted by this critique of traditional environmentalism*, such environmentalism is out of touch with the anthropogenic character of our real environmental situation. As the political moralist polishes her moral standpoint in the hope that real politics will somehow conform to it, so the ethical environmentalist - the respecter and conserver of nature - polishes her idea of pure wilderness or the like, as an external source of value free of human influence that is supposed to shape environmental practice. Yet this is hopeless: there is no such thing in the Anthropocene. It is pointless and counterproductive then to try to respect or conserve it[[9]](#footnote-9). However, as Stephens goes on to say, ‘…it is hard to deny that [such] attacks on traditional environmentalism have overwhelmingly operated by setting up more strawmen than an international scarecrow-making contest’ (p.122).

Indeed, the picture of traditional environmentalism as committed to the notion of *pure* nature (lacking *any* interference by or entanglement with the human) is no less of a strawman than that of the pure political moralist. The moralistic environmentalist who takes untouched wilderness as something to be saved in its pure state and regarded as a fully autonomous source of normative imperatives with which to shape human endeavours is a very rare animal[[10]](#footnote-10). Wilderness conservation is consistent with a view of wilderness and nonhuman nature generally as a matter of degree, and of humanity and nonhuman nature as intertwined within the earthly environment. Things can be strongly affected by human action and still be *significantly* autonomous from humanity. Although talk of our environmental situation as one of ‘socio-natural entanglements’ seems right, the picture of traditional environmental preoccupations with respecting nature, wilderness conservation and so on as inconsistent with this is at least largely mistaken. This point is worth emphasising, even to the extent of hammering it home. Here are some grounds for it (see also Fremaux, this volume):

The totemic 1964 U.S. Wilderness Act does not define wilderness as untouched nature. Thus: ‘[t]he authors of the Wilderness Act wisely recognised that, even in 1964, there were no remaining landscapes that had completely escaped the imprint of humanity… That’s why they defined wilderness as “*generally* appearing to have been affected *primarily* by the forces of nature with the imprint of man’s work *substantially* unnoticeable”’ (Wolke 2014, p.199, his emphasis). Similarly, David Johns says ‘[t]he U.S. Wilderness Act… does not use the term *pristine* but instead deliberately uses the term *untrammelled*, a term very close to the original meaning of wildlands as undomesticated or self-willed land but not necessarily pristine. Many conservation groups… are not concerned with purity, any more than civil libertarians cease defending the U.S. Bill of Rights just because they are routinely ignored by governments’ (Johns 2014, pp.34-5, his emphasis). Nor was Aldo Leopold, hero of ‘traditional’ conservationism, concerned with pure untouched wilderness (Meine 2014, p.47).

More recently environmental philosophers have discussed how the ‘nonhumanity’ or ‘autonomy’ of wilderness and nonhuman nature in general is both greatly important and a matter of degree[[11]](#footnote-11). Indeed, Ned Hettinger has argued, plausibly enough, that the more nature is humanised the more precious is the remaining relatively autonomous nature (Hettinger 2014, p.178). This is an obvious position available to ‘traditional’ environmental ethicists committed to respecting *relatively* autonomous nature in the context of the comprehensive anthropogenic impacts associated with the Anthropocene. Rejecting that position requires rejecting that commitment. But on what grounds should that commitment be rejected? Obviously, particular accounts of what it is (that makes it right) to respect relatively autonomous nonhuman nature vary in plausibility, as do accounts of respect for humanity. I am referring to grounds for ruling out the very idea of such nature’s ethical significance in general. Are they a matter simply of a given, prior commitment to unqualified ethical anthropocentrism with which to structure environmental decision-making; a piece of *pure* anthropocentric moralism shielded by repeated reference to how the Anthropocene dramatically demonstrates the untenability of its supposed rival: the strawman pure wilderness fanatic? This raises the matter of SAA as ideology, to which I return shortly. Before that though it might be argued that the Anthropocene brings reasons to reject traditional environmentalism that don’t involve recourse to strawmen. I will briefly consider two such possible reasons.

Firstly, it might be claimed that the complexity and scale of anthropogenic impacts, such as those involved in climate change, make traditional environmental goals unfeasible even if not taken to be motivated by concern for pure nature. Things are so far gone, now that we are in the Anthropocene, that traditional preservationist and conservationist goals are *practically equivalent* to attempts to restore or preserve untouched nature, even if these are not their theoretical or declared motivations. This is mistaken, at least as a universalised claim.

Notice, for example, that the complex entanglement of humanity with nonhuman entities and processes does not rule out what Ned Hettinger calls ‘the potential for humanization to *flush out* of human-impacted natural systems and the real possibility for greater degrees of naturalness to return’ (Hettinger 2014, p.179). Projects of restoration, rewilding or ‘just letting naturalness come back on its own’ need not involve an impossible attempt to ‘return’ things to ‘some original baseline state or trajectory’ before any human involvement (ibid.). We might add that the impossibility of restoring an ecosystem (E) to its earlier state, because of anthropogenic climate change, say, does not preclude ‘restoring nature’ there. To think it does is to confuse a type (nature) with an occurrence of that type (E). Anthropogenic impacts might rule out the restoration of (E), yet not the encouragement of another, relatively wild, ecosystem (F). Restoration is itself a matter of degree, whether focused on 1) restoring overall naturalness, or 2) restoring the historical occurrence of naturalness, as embodied in (E). Depending on the situation 2) might not be possible *at all*; but this would not show that 1) is impossible, even if the ecosystems involved are more or less ‘novel’ (compare Baker, this volume) [[12]](#footnote-12).

Secondly, it might be argued that decisions to pursue such projects (or not) are human management decisions, and not only does the Anthropocene make plain that we are now in a new era of de facto human management of terrestrial ‘nature’, but de facto human management negates nonhuman autonomy by definition. This argument is also mistaken. Consider a couple of examples. If having held you captive in my cellar for a decade I come to my senses and free you, that it is *my* decision to release you and *me* who removes the chains and unlocks the door does not mean that upon release you remain no less subject to my will than before. On the contrary, you now have significantly more autonomy (with respect to me); even supposing you will always remain profoundly affected by the experience and will never be the person you would have been had it never happened. Similarly, there may be overwhelmingly powerful reasons not to abandon a particular city and ‘let nature take its course’ there. But if the decision is made to do that then the following considerations do nothing to preclude a significant increase in wildness: the decision is a human decision; there is a managed re-location of the human population and introduction of some (relatively) wild species; what develops there will still be significantly affected by human activity elsewhere; there can be no ‘reversion’ (even on geological timescales) to the state that would have obtained had there never been a human presence there at all. Thus de facto human management does not preclude concern for (relatively) nonhuman nature, and associated conservation and restoration of wilderness ideas and policies.

**Strong Anthropocene advocacy and ideology**

Let us now consider matters of ideology and the realist complaint that moralistic political philosophy is insufficiently aware of its own ideological status; how its prized values might embody historical power relations, rather than intuitions of a morality prior to politics. ‘Crystallised power can pass itself off as morality and so even as a critique of power’, as Rossi and Sleat put it (p.692). The suspicion is that putatively independent, ‘pure’ moral perspectives may really be politics by underhand means: concerns of the powerful presented as the simple, normatively fundamental truth or deliverance of pure reason.

Clearly, though, this ideology critique can be a dangerously double-edged sword, especially when deployed in a context populated with strawmen. Moralist political philosophy may often be ideological but, insofar as SPR is constituted by opposition to pure moralism (i.e. by opposition to what is mostly a strawman) it risks the ideology charge too. This is because equating moral critique of political conditions and actions with an indefensibly pure, yet rarely instantiated, political moralism is itself a way of shielding the powerful from such critique. Pure political moralism and SPR, *defined now in terms of setting up such moralism as a (strawman) ubiquitous presence*, rather than (or as well as) in terms of declaring politics to be fully autonomous from morality, are in the same boat regarding ideology. In this respect they are made for each other.

This situation is paralleled in the Anthropocene discourse. It might be thought that traditional environmentalism is ideological. Perhaps some is, and doubtless some wilderness conservation projects have merited the criticism that they represent a form of cultural imperialism by the rich and powerful (see e.g. Guha 1989). But *insofar as SAA is constituted by opposition to pure wilderness advocacy* it too risks the ideology charge. The view of traditional environmentalism as *typically* committed to imposing pure-nature-loving ways, based on the unexamined value commitments of the powerful, is wide of the mark (see Meine, pp.51-2). Take for example the following principles of the Earth Charter quoted by ecologist Brendan Mackey:

‘(1a) Recognise that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings’;

‘(16f) ‘Recognise that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth and the larger whole of which all are a part’ (Mackey 2014, p.134).

It is difficult to interpret these principles as the interests of the powerful dressed up as moral truths. The perspective they embody doesn’t seem all that powerful. Given also that its advocates recognise a range of important values (including political legitimacy and anthropocentric environmental values), it seems better interpreted as intended to inform the ethical dimensions of ethical/political entanglements as these relate to nature/human entanglements[[13]](#footnote-13). The fundamental point here is that *even if* the traditional environmental ethical input can be or has sometimes been ideological camouflage for imperialism, say, SAA is also vulnerable to the ideology critique insofar as it is constituted by opposition to strawman wilderness fanaticism. Equating respect for nature ‘for its own sake’ as *an* important value consideration with a preoccupation with pure wilderness is a way of embedding a purely anthropocentric moralism that serves the interests of the powerful and embeds domination. It suggests that environmental politics is to conform to an unqualified anthropocentrism as the simple normatively fundamental truth asserted in the name of scientific reason. Alternatives are put out of play through association with the ‘irrelevant’ strawman pure wilderness advocate. It is difficult not to see this as ‘crystallised power passing itself off as morality and so even as a critique of power’, where the ‘morality’ is what Meine calls the ‘dominant assumption of human social and economic development *that humans are the sole source of meaning and value in the universe and that … nature exist[s] to be exploited for maximum individual and corporate economic development*’ (Meine, p.521 my emphasis). Pure wilderness advocacy (even if taken to ride roughshod over indigenous peoples’ relationship to nature in the interests of colonial domination) and the strongest SAA, understood in terms of opposition to ubiquitous (strawman) wilderness fanaticism, are in the same boat regarding ideology. In this respect they too are made for one another.

Thus Anthropocene advocacy needs to distance itself from such ideological moralism if it is to play a constructive role in the ethical/political entanglement that is the environmental cause. But there is a further, related, problem here. Anthropocene advocacy is in a difficult position conceptually if the Anthropocene is taken to have normative significance over and above a technical ‘value free’ revision of a natural scientific classification. If it designates a reality wider than (or not already reduced to) the geological, biological and ecological bases of the proposal to reclassify the current age, then what the Anthropocene designates is largely an exercise in power, and so is indeed keyed to the political element in the ethics/politics entanglement. As Guess says, to think in terms of that element is to think largely ‘about agency, power and interests and the relations amongst these’ (p.25), and such thinking can be organised around an expanded version of Lenin’s ‘who whom’ question: who is doing what to whom for whose benefit (pp.22ff). But the abstract term ‘Anthropocene’ smooths over these questions, presenting power as exercised by unified Anthropos – ‘Mankind’ – as such (Malm & Hornberg 2014); and, for ideologically moralistic forms of SAA, exercised for the benefit of that same abstraction. This obscures the actual inequalities in power of different groups and classes of humans, all of whom are equally subsumed under the Anthropocene enterprise.

If the Anthropocene is indeed more than simply a classificatory label and denotes agency, then we might say that the Anthropocene is something that is ‘being done’. This can be understood in different ways. In one sense, presumably, the Anthropocene is ‘being done’ by some humans to nature and via that to themselves and to other humans. For whose benefit? This is unclear. A full answer would need to step down from these abstractions – Humanity, Nature – and refer to particular groups of relatively powerful and powerless people, and also to concrete populations, processes and systems that are relatively nonhuman. But then insofar as it is invoked within a normative political discourse, as opposed to merely naming a technical revision within a narrowly scientific discourse, the Anthropocene looks like a highly suspicious notion precisely because it serves to smooth away those differences in power and obscures those questions.

Of course, it is open to those who talk of the Anthropocene to emphasise that the notion is not *intended* to smooth away those differences or imply that all of humanity is equally responsible for the situation it portrays or equally vulnerable to the resulting environmental dangers. If it is taken that way, then it is being misinterpreted or misused (see e.g. Angus, pp.224ff)[[14]](#footnote-14). But then why should it be retained through the transition from the technical scientific domain to the political domain? Given the risk of smoothing away differences in power and obscuring issues pertinent to ideology it seems better to replace it during that transition either with talk of more specific anthropogenic environmental crises or with one of the alternatives suggested in the critical literature on the Anthropocene (such as ‘Capitalocene’ or ‘Econocene’; see, for example, Baskin 2015).

At the very least talk of the Anthropocene within normative political contexts needs to be careful not to slide into what we might think of as another sense in which the Anthropocene is (or could be) ‘being done’. In this sense, ‘doing the Anthropocene’ is a matter of adopting very strong forms of SAA constituted by denial of the autonomy of nonhuman nature and/or critique of strawman pure wilderness fanaticism. Here, ‘doing the Anthropocene’ amounts to the ideological boosting of a certain anthropocentric and techno-managerial socioeconomic picture for which it is only too convenient that traditional environmentalism be muscled out of the way, rather than renewed in the light of developing and darkening environmental circumstances.

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1. See especially Rossi & Sleat (2014). For discussion of further realist themes, see Galston (2010),. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I take these to be synonymous for the purposes of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Raymond Geuss sometimes seems to come close, for example when he excludes all but ‘anodyne’ ethics from politics (Geuss 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps G. A. Cohen’s (2009) defence of ‘fact-independent’ principles is a counter-example here. In which case realist criticism of him as a pure moralist doesn’t set him up as a strawman. See Larmore for critical discussion of Cohen’s position. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One wonders then how autonomy is supposed to apply in the case of persons, where, if it has any application at all, it must be in a relational form dependent on an array of interpersonal and institutional conditions. See Heyd, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See McKibben (1990) for the end of nature; for nature scepticism see for example Vogel (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Also known as ‘neo-greens’, ‘pragmatic environmentalists’, ‘new conservationists’, ‘Anthropocene boosters’, ‘postmodern greens’ (see Butler, p.x). There are variations between them, but they include, for example, Ellis (2011a, 2011b), Norhaus & Shellenberger (2007), and others associated with the Breakthrough Institute and journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, Dale Jamieson refers to the Anthropocene to underscore the ways our environmental situation calls for a new ethic, but also argues that ‘respect for nature’ ought to be a virtue of such an ethic (Jamieson 2014, pp.188ff). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example, Ellis (2011a, p.1027): ‘Environmentalist traditions have long called for a halt to human interference in ecology and the Earth system. In the Anthropocene the anthropogenic biosphere is permanent… making the call to avoid human interference in the biosphere irrelevant’ (Ellis 2011a, p.1027). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Perhaps not completely absent. For example, some forms of primitivism might be interpreted this way, as might positions, such as Peter Reed’s (1989) ‘Man Apart’ account, that express an excessively strong sense of nature’s otherness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, Heyd (2005), Hailwood (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See also Hettinger’s (2012) arguments against mutually exclusive conceptions of restoration and preservation. Both can be called for, though restoration should not be thought of as an *ideal* or paradigm of human-nature relations. Rather it is sometimes a ‘fundamentally regrettable’ necessity given the ‘past abuse of nature’. (Hettinger 2012, p.41). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The issue here is not simply whether a given doctrine *can be used* to serve the interests of the powerful (presumably many, if not all, benign doctrines can be used that way, against the intentions behind them), but whether those committed to them are aware of the possibility and locate the doctrine in a framework of moral and political values that militate against, for example, crass universalisation and imposition regardless of variations in local, concrete cultural, political – and environmental – conditions. The same applies to conceptions of human rights and democracy, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Compare note 13 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)