Anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene: Towards an Ostensive Humanism

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Abstract

The idea that we must move beyond anthropocentrism to overcome interspecies injustice and environmental collapse is widespread within the environmental humanities. Yet, the concept of anthropocentrism remains ambiguous, and so do some of the arguments raised against it. What exactly should we move beyond and why? The article attempts to answer these questions and clarify the merits and limitations of both anthropocentric and post-anthropocentric views within ethics and ontology. This article proposes that although some implausible and morally problematic forms of anthropocentrism should be denounced, there are other ways in which we must remain anthropocentric. The article disambiguates the concept of anthropocentrism and assesses the key arguments against it, before it goes on to outline a minimal form of anthropocentrism that we call ostensive humanism. Ostensive humanism is compatible with many post-anthropocentric ideas but suggests that the ethical and political project aimed at ending interspecies injustice and the climate crisis inevitably points to human beings as its moral addressees.

Key words: post-anthropocentrism, anthropocentrism, humanism, moral responsibility, Anthropocene

1 Introduction

The advent of the Anthropocene has led to a renewed and critical interest in the idea of anthropocentrism. Indeed, the claim that we must move beyond anthropocentrism is widespread within the environmental humanities. Yet, as we will show in this article, the concept of anthropocentrism remains ambiguous, and so do some of the arguments raised against it. What exactly should we move beyond and why? We will attempt to answer these questions and clarify the merits and limitations of both anthropocentric and post-

anthropocentric views within ethics and ontology. As we shall see, critics rightly denounce some implausible and morally problematic forms of anthropocentrism. Still, there are other ways in which we must remain anthropocentric.

The planetary crisis is not merely a biophysical crisis but also a crisis of reason related to the ideas and sensibilities we use to understand nature and our place within it.[1] It has been argued that many of the ideas underlying contemporary political, socio-economic, and legal practices are anthropocentric in the sense that they grant human beings an exceptional position within nature. Critics argue that in order to transfigure those narratives and material structures that lead to ecological collapse, we must cultivate less anthropocentric or even post-anthropocentric ways of thinking that critically expose, bracket, or displace the idea of human exceptionality.[2] Such criticism gains traction within scholarly debates[3] but also within various societal practices.[4] We are sympathetic to the political and moral concerns underlying

[1] Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*.

[2] E.g., Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Skiveren, "New Materialism and the Eco-Marxist challenge". There are two ways of understanding such claims. They might be part of an eliminativist project, according to which the concept of the human as such is harmful and should be eliminated. Alternatively, they are part of an ameliorative project, where the intention is not to abandon the concept of the human as such but to change it for the better.

[3] The theoretical trends of posthumanism (e.g., Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, and Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*; for an overview, see Braidotti & Hlavajova, *Posthuman Glossary*) and new materialism (e.g., Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, and Coole & Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms") are main contemporary examples. Another example is classical environmental ethics (see note 5 below). Our aim is not to argue that there is a substantial agreement between or even within these movements. Instead, it is to clarify the concept of anthropocentrism, to reconstruct key arguments against it, and to evaluate the strength of these arguments. Many of these arguments are found within the posthumanist, new materialist, and, to a lesser extent, environmental ethics, literature, and we therefore often draw on these resources. In doing so, however, we focus exclusively on the arguments raised against anthropocentrism, and we only reconstruct the underlying theories to the extent that it is necessary to understand the arguments against anthropocentrism. In the following, the term "post-anthropocentrism" refers to this diverse family of views rejecting anthropocentrism.

[4] One example is the *Wild Law*-movement (see Burdon, *Exploring Wild Law*, Fremaux, *After the Anthropocene*). Transcending traditional legal systems that make nonhuman life and natural resources vulnerable to exploitation, Wild Law allocates juridical

this landscape. Nevertheless, some of the arguments raised in the theoretical literature against anthropocentrism are, it seems to us, confused. This confusion lies in a failure to disambiguate the concept of anthropocentrism.[5] If the Anthropocene is indeed a crisis of reason that requires us to critically rethink our relation to and position within nature, this conceptual problem is significant.

The aim of this article is, first, to clarify what anthropocentrism is, and, second, to assess why, whether and in what sense it should be rejected. We proceed in three steps. In Section 2, we distinguish between *ontological anthropocentrism* – the claim that human beings possess abilities that make them ontologically distinct from other beings – and *normative anthropocentrism* – the claim that human beings have a unique moral status that sets them apart from nonhuman beings.[6] But even with this distinction in hand, the concept of anthropocentrism remains equivocal. This is not only because the connection between the two types of anthropocentrism is rarely explicated, but also because both normative and ontological anthropocentrism cover a large range of subtypes.[7] These subtypes are distinguished in terms of their extensions and,

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representation to the nonhuman. Examples of practiced Wild Law are found in Ecuador, Columbia, India, and Argentina, where ecosystems, rivers and nonhuman animals have received legal protection.

[5] For related but preliminary attempts at such disambiguation, see Knudsen, "Fænomenologi og antropocentrisme", and Willert, "Schelling's Concept of Evil and his 'Ideal-Realismus' in the Anthropocene".

[6] Normative anthropocentrism is the key concern in environmental ethics. Environmental ethics include, e.g., the tradition of deep ecology (Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement"), Singer's utilitarianism (Singer, *Animal Liberation*), Regan's deontology (Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*), Sandler's virtue ethics (Sandler, *Character and Environment*), and various eco-feminist approaches (e.g., Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*).

[7] Although the concept of anthropocentrism is pivotal to environmental ethics, posthumanism, and new materialism, the term is not necessarily used, let alone in a systematic fashion. For example, as noted by Mylius ("Three Types of Anthropocentrism," 1), it is only used a few times by authors like Wolfe (*What is Posthumanism?*) and Bennett (*Vibrant Matter*). When it is used in a technical sense, it typically refers only to a form of what we call normative anthropocentrism (see Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Midgley, "The End of Anthropocentrism?"). In more recent work, however, it has become more common to give more nuanced definitions (e.g., Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*).

with respect to normative anthropocentrism, the kind of moral status (moral agency or moral patiency) they ascribe to human beings.

In Section 3, we reconstruct what we take to be the key arguments against anthropocentrism and assess which subtype (if any) they are likely to rebut. Finally, Section 4 outlines and responds to a central shortcoming of many post-anthropocentric positions. In short, critiques of anthropocentrism tend to involve a set of moral demands (e.g., to mitigate climate change or to end interspecies injustice) and, therefore, also an implicit moral address. We argue that this moral address performatively implies a form of anthropocentrism. To whom, if not humans, are these demands addressed? Spelling out this minimal anthropocentrism, we develop a position named ostensive humanism. Ostensive humanism dodges the arguments raised against traditional anthropocentrism and addresses the shortcoming of post-anthropocentrism regarding moral agency. The central idea is that we must, on the one hand, grant that there is no strict line of demarcation between the human and the nonhuman, and, on the other hand, recognize that post-anthropocentrism performatively appeals or points to human beings as their moral addressees.

2 The Many Faces of Anthropocentrism

The notion of anthropocentrism traditionally refers to the normative view that human beings are the only beings worthy of moral considerations. On this view, anthropocentrism amounts to "human chauvinism"[8] or "speciesism".[9] However, the concept can and should also be applied in different contexts than ethics. One problem with the traditional view is that it presupposes that we can make a neat separation between normative discourses and other philosophical discourses. That is, it presupposes that the normative question regarding anthropocentrism can be settled independently of ontological questions about how the human and the nonhuman are related. This worry is central to much recent work within the environmental humanities. Although rarely explicit about their own use of the term, critics of anthropocentrism often argue that a mere critique of normative anthropocentrism cannot stand alone.[10]

It seems, then, that the issue of anthropocentrism goes beyond ethics and includes other versions of the claim that some feature is unique to human

[8] Routley & Routley, "Human Chauvinism".

[9] Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

[10] E.g., Braidotti & Gilroy, "The Contested Posthumanities," 25.

beings. We will therefore disambiguate anthropocentrism by distinguishing not only between normative and ontological anthropocentrism but also between several subtypes of anthropocentrism before clarifying the conceptual relations between them.

2.1 Ontological Anthropocentrism

How should we understand the claim that human beings are ontologically distinct from other beings? This is usually not taken to mean that some combination of physical attributes (e.g., bipedalism, opposable thumbs, brain size, vocal range, a high number of sweat glands) makes it possible for folk zoologists to distinguish human beings from other mammals. Rather than focusing on physical attributes, traditional humanisms have argued that the human is a *zoon logon echon* or an *animal rationale*, where this suggests, roughly, that human beings are distinct from the rest of nature insofar as (some of) their causal effects on the world must be understood as actions, which are justified or guided by specific mental states (e.g., reasons or intentions) rather than as mere behavior, which lacks such justification or guidance. Traditional humanists admit, of course, that actions *depend* on physical processes, but they insist that actions cannot be adequately described in reductive, physicalist terms. In Wilfried Sellars's famous terminology, actions must be understood within the "space of reasons" rather than the realm of natural causes.[11]

This characteristic of humanism is crude, but our aim is not to determine its historical adequacy. Instead, we will use this gloss as a starting point for clarifying what it could mean that human beings are ontologically distinct from other beings. In the following, we will suggest that ontological anthropocentrism assumes not only that there is an ontological difference that separates humans from nonhumans but, importantly, that this ontological difference concerns the possession of certain abilities. We discuss the notion of abilities in more detail in Section 3.1, but the main idea is, roughly, that an entity possesses some ability if and only if the exercise of that ability is conditioned by some volitional feature of that entity. This means that abilities are properties that relate agents to actions since, by definition, *agents* are entities with the relevant volitional feature and *actions* are the events that result from the exercise of that ability. It should be noted that this assumption does not give the explanatory game away, since there are many nonhuman agents: Corporations

[11] See also Anscombe, *Intention*, and Davidson, *Actions and Events*.

are able to file lawsuits, dogs are able to bite, bats are able to echolocate, and snails are able to smell a leaf of lettuce. The question of ontological anthropocentrism is then whether certain abilities separate humans from nonhumans.

There are several ways to formulate such a claim about how humans are distinct from nonhumans. Consider, for instance:

> *Weak ontological anthropocentrism*: Some abilities are possessed only by human beings.

This thesis states that some abilities are possessed by some but not necessarily all human beings. However, for the simple reason that weak ontological anthropocentrism is trivially true, this kind of anthropocentrism is presumably not what critics of anthropocentrism have in mind. As far as we know, it is true that *only* human beings, although not *all* human beings, are able to construct mathematical equations, write books, and travel into space. Hence, a sound critique of ontological anthropocentrism must have a different and less plausible version of ontological anthropocentrism in mind. For instance:

> *Strong ontological anthropocentrism*: Some abilities are possessed by all human beings and only human beings.

In contrast to the weak version, strong ontological anthropocentrism claims that some abilities are necessary for being a human. This appears to be the kind of anthropocentrism invoked when post-anthropocentric thinkers reject a strong, ontological dichotomy between the human and the nonhuman since it does indeed entail a razor-sharp distinction between the human and the nonhuman.

As we will show in the next section, there are convincing arguments against strong ontological anthropocentrism predicated on the idea that it takes only a single atypical individual to blur the razor-sharp distinction between humans and nonhumans. For this reason, humanists would be interested in developing a position stronger than weak ontological anthropocentrism and weaker than strong ontological anthropocentrism. An obvious way of doing this would be to qualify that species-defining abilities need only be *species-typical* rather than instantiated in all individual species members. According to this line of argument, individuals are categorized in accordance with their *potential for* or

impairment in regards to some species-typical ability rather than according to whether that ability is actualized in each member. If ontological anthropocentrism must still exclude nonhuman beings, we can formulate the claim in the following way:

> *Typified ontological anthropocentrism*: Some abilities are possessed by species-typical human beings and not typical instances of other species.

Importantly, rather than offering a razor-sharp distinction between the human and the nonhuman, typified ontological anthropocentrism allows some degree of vagueness since the line of demarcation only concerns species-typical abilities. It is our impression that this captures the spirit of traditional humanist definitions of the human being more than weak and strong ontological anthropocentrism since traditional humanists would surely not deny that some humans, say, suffer from aphasia or irrationality. Similarly, this formulation allows that some nonhuman beings possess the species-defining ability of humans but only if that nonhuman being is atypical. Thus, if we imagine that an octopus became, say, linguistically competent or rational in some freak accident, it still would not cast doubt upon the distinction between human and nonhuman in a problematic way as long as its newly gained abilities were not typical for octopi in general.

Having thus distinguished three kinds of ontological anthropocentrism, let us turn to normative anthropocentrism.

2.2 Normative Anthropocentrism

Normative anthropocentrism is the claim that human beings have a unique moral status compared to nonhuman beings. This too allows for a weak, a strong, and a typified, formulation:

> *Weak normative anthropocentrism*: Only human beings have moral status.

> *Strong normative anthropocentrism*: All and only human beings have moral status.

> *Typified normative anthropocentrism*: Species-typical human beings have moral status; typical instances of other species do not.

But things are more complicated still. In addition to this threefold distinction, we also need to distinguish between moral agency and moral patiency.[12] A being is a *moral agent* only if that being is an agent and an appropriate target of moral praise and blame. A being is a *moral patient* only if that being is a subject of moral concern in the sense that it is appropriate for moral agents to praise or blame each other for showing or failing to show concern for that being.[13]

When talking about normative anthropocentrism, one must clarify whether one refers to *agency-based normative anthropocentrism*, according to which only human beings are moral agents, or *patiency-based normative anthropocentrism*, according to which only human beings are moral patients. Both can come in three different strengths. This adds up to six types of normative anthropocentrism:

Types of Normative Anthropocentrism		
Strength	**Mode**	**Description**
Weak	Agency-based	Only human beings are moral agents.
	Patiency-based	Only human beings are moral patients.
Strong	Agency-based	All and only human beings are moral agents.
	Patiency-based	All and only human beings are moral patients.
Typified	Agency-based	Species-typical human beings are moral agents; typical instances of other species are not.
	Patiency-based	Species-typical human beings are moral

[12] Pluhar, "Moral Agents and Moral Patients".

[13] This definition only stipulates (relatively uncontroversial) necessary conditions for moral agency and patiency while leaving open the question of whether these conditions are sufficient.

		patients; typical instances of other species are not.

This gives us a total of nine possible subtypes of anthropocentrism.

2.3 Conceptual Relations Between the Different Types of Anthropocentrism

Before considering some of the main arguments directed against anthropocentrism in Section 3, it is helpful to briefly consider the conceptual relations between these different types. In particular, three things should be kept in mind.

First, patiency-based and agency-based normative anthropocentrism do not necessarily imply each other. It is possible to reject patiency-based normative anthropocentrism and accept (some version of) agency-based normative anthropocentrism. For instance, you might argue (1) that sapience is the necessary and sufficient condition for moral agency, (2) that sentience is necessary and sufficient for moral patiency, (3) that only human beings have sapience, and (4) that all animate life has sentience. These claims are entirely compatible. Similarly, you could in principle reject agency-based normative anthropocentrism while accepting some version of patiency-based normative anthropocentrism. For instance, one could argue (1) that sapience is the necessary and sufficient condition for moral agency, (2) that the ability to form second-order desires is the necessary and sufficient condition for moral patiency,[14] (3) that human beings, octopi, certain breeds of aliens, and some AIs have sapience, and (4) that only human beings have the ability to form second-order desires.

Second, ontological anthropocentrism does not necessarily imply normative anthropocentrism. For instance, one might argue that (1) the ability to do basic trigonometry is possessed by species-typical human beings and not typical instances of other species, (2) that the ability to act as if the maxims of one's action were to become a universal law of nature is the necessary and sufficient

[14] First-order desires are desires for this or that, while second-order desires are desires to have certain first-order desires. Frankfurt ("Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person") argues that only human beings have the capacity for second-order desires, although he does not take this to be the necessary and sufficient condition for moral patiency.

condition for moral agency, and (3) that the ability for forming second-order desires is the necessary and sufficient condition for moral patiency. Only claim (1) is ontologically anthropocentric, but assuming that the ability to do basic trigonometry neither implies nor requires any of the two other abilities, this ontological anthropocentrism is normatively inert.

Third, normative anthropocentrism sometimes implies ontological anthropocentrism, but not always. Normative anthropocentrism implies ontological anthropocentrism if and only if moral status is determined by one or several abilities (e.g., the ability to form moral judgments) and one or several of these abilities are possessed in the weak, typified, or strong way by human beings. It is, however, logically possible that moral status is determined by another kind of property than an ability. It is thus logically possible (although utterly implausible) that moral agency and patiency are determined by, say, skin color or shoe size. Skin color and shoe size are physical attributes, not abilities, so they do not imply ontological anthropocentrism in our sense of the term.

3 Key Arguments Against Anthropocentrism

In this section, we will identify a range of influential arguments raised against anthropocentrism and critically assess which types of anthropocentrism are affected by these arguments. The overview is not meant to be exhaustive, but our hope is that it will provide a better understanding of the debate surrounding anthropocentrism and reveal certain blind spots within these arguments that are rarely acknowledged in the literature.

3.1 Arguments Against Ontological Anthropocentrism

We identify three key arguments raised against ontological anthropocentrism.

Arguments from marginal cases. These arguments call into question a strict line of demarcation between the human and the nonhuman by showing either that specific nonhuman beings possess the species-defining ability or that specific human beings do *not* possess the species-defining ability.

Arguments from marginal cases are typically wielded against strong ontological anthropocentrism. If one can show that a single human being (e.g., an infant) does not possess the species-defining ability, strong ontological anthropocentrism is false. Arguments with a similar structure can also be used against weak ontological anthropocentrism if they can show that some

nonhuman being (e.g., the super-octopus from before) possesses an ability that was assumed to be exclusive to human beings. Such arguments sometimes point to results from animal psychology showing that nonhuman animals can communicate, cooperate, feel emotions, have long memories, and create meaning.[15] Typified ontological anthropocentrism is, however, invulnerable to arguments from marginal cases insofar as it categorizes species members according to their potential for or impairment in regard to some species-typical ability rather than according to whether that ability is actualized in each member. On this picture, an infant is a human being by virtue of its potential for, say, a certain degree of intelligence, just like a patient suffering from a traumatic brain injury is a human being by virtue of their impairment in regard to this degree of intelligence even if some token octopi are more intelligent than these token human beings.

The internal differentiation argument. To challenge typified ontological anthropocentrism, critics sometimes object to the very idea of species-typical abilities by arguing that the human species is internally fractured in the sense that different cultures, sexes, genders, racializations as well as economic and power inequalities make it impossible to identify any species-typical abilities. They argue that these abilities are at most typical for a specific socio-political subgroup of humans. Summarizing this line of critique, Braidotti writes that "[u]niversal 'Man', in fact, is implicitly assumed to be masculine, white, urbanised, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognized polity" (Braidotti 2013a: 7f). "Post-anthropocentric practices," in contrast, "blur the qualitative lines of demarcation not only among categories (male/female; black/white; human/animal; dead/alive; centre/margin; etc.), but also within each of one of them [...] The generic figure of the human is consequently in trouble" (2013a: 7).

This argument directly challenges typified ontological anthropocentrism, and any argument effective against typified ontological anthropocentrism is also effective against strong ontological anthropocentrism.

The interdependence argument. A very prominent argument, especially among some posthumanists and new materialists, challenges ontological anthropocentrism by denying that human beings can ever "possess" abilities in

[15] See Shettleworth, "Animal Cognition and Animal Behaviour", and Andrews, *The Animal Mind*.

the relevant sense since, as Jane Bennett writes, "animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other".[16] Instead, it is claimed that we should give up "the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman",[17] because even when "humans act, they do not exercise exclusively human capabilities, but express and engage a variety of other actants".[18] The idea is that human beings cannot be said to "possess" abilities because abilities only exist by virtue of a "structural interdependence"[19] between the human and nonhuman or by virtue of more-than-human "assemblages," "hybrids" or "naturecultures." To illustrate, this argument holds that you writing a paper cannot really be said to be possessed by or ascribed to you (as an exercise of your abilities) because this activity depends on or is entangled with a great range of nonhuman artifacts and your life is sustained by, say, the ecosystem of microbes that inhabits your digestive tract.[20] Therefore, it is not "you" who does the writing. Instead, the writing emerges from a complex set of sub-processes.

This argument against ontological anthropocentrism is more radical than the prior two. If it succeeds, it requires us to abandon all forms of ontological anthropocentrism, since they all presuppose that human beings can possess abilities. In assessing this argument, however, we should be cautious and distinguish between two different ways in which abilities can be said to be interdependent.

First, an ability can be interdependent in the sense that the entity that possesses that ability cannot exercise it without relying on other entities. Let us call this line of argument *the modest interdependence argument*. Second, an ability can be interdependent in such a way that it is in principle impossible to attribute abilities and the exercise of them to any specific entity. Call this *the radical interdependence argument*. The key difference is that the modest interdependence argument acknowledges that an ability can be possessed by or attributed to an entity although the exercise of that ability always relies on other entities, while the radical interdependence argument claims that abilities cannot be possessed by or attributed to entities but should be conceived solely as relational features.

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[16] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 34.

[17] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 116.

[18] Bennett, "Vibrant matter," 447.

[19] Braidotti & Gilroy, "The Contested Posthumanities," 22.

[20] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120f.

To illustrate the difference between these two approaches, consider Priyanka's ability to drive a car. Both versions of the interdependence argument rightly point out the absurdity in thinking that Priyanka's ability to drive a car can be exercised without Priyanka relying on other entities such as the car, the automobile industry, gas, roads, gravity, etc. The two versions of the argument differ, however, on how we should understand Priyanka's role in this network of relations and entities.

The modest interdependence argument holds that although Priyanka necessarily relies on these entities whenever she drives, the ability to drive can still be possessed by or attributed to her. This requires that we show why Priyanka's role in her driving the car differs qualitatively from the roles of the car and the gas and so on. Within the philosophy of action, there are several competing accounts of what makes Priyanka's role special.[21] But for our purposes, a simple conditional analysis suffices: Priyanka has the ability to drive just in case Priyanka would drive if she were to try to drive.

The key idea here is that abilities are possessed by entities if and only if the exercise of those abilities are conditioned by some volitional feature of that entity (e.g., Priyanka's trying). This requires a further analysis of the relevant volitional feature, but this can also be relatively simple. For example, Priyanka *tries* to drive just in case Priyanka performs some other action or set of actions (she turns on the ignition, switches the car into gear, and pushes down the pedal) believing that this action or set of actions will correspond to her driving. In contrast, Priyanka does not have the ability to lift the car since she would not lift the car even if she tried.

The point is that by virtue of being the "trying"-component of the Priyanka-car-gas-industry-road-gravity complex, Priyanka's relation to her driving is very different from those of the other components within that complex. As the "trying"-component, Priyanka has a special power over her driving. This is true although her driving relies on the other components. For instance, Priyanka cannot drive without gas. But Priyanka's relation to her driving remains very different from the relation of the gas to her driving since the gas cannot *try* to do anything and therefore cannot possess an ability.

The radical interdependence argument denies that we can attribute the ability to drive to Priyanka. Barad, for instance, claims that agency "is an enactment, not something that someone or something has" and that it "cannot be

[21] For overviews, see Mele, "Agents' Abilities", and Maier, "Abilities".

designated as an attribute of subjects or objects".[22] Instead, Priyanka's driving is constituted out of specific intra-actions of material-discursive apparatuses. This means, roughly, that Priyanka's driving is constituted by and should not be abstracted from the Priyanka-car-gas-industry-road-gravity complex. Rather than saying that Priyanka plays a special role in the complex, the radical interdependence argument suggests that all components within the complex have similar (or, if you prefer, equally special) roles to play. Barad thus takes issue with the very "framing of agency as a localizable attribution".[23]

There is a big difference between these two seemingly similar arguments. The modest insistence that abilities can be possessed by agents but are interdependent in their exercise does not conflict with any form of ontological anthropocentrism. This is so since ontological anthropocentrism does not preclude that species-demarcating abilities rely on nonhuman beings as long as they can nonetheless be possessed by or attributed to human agents. The radical version, on the contrary, rejects exactly this qualification and thereby all forms of ontological anthropocentrism.

3.2 Arguments Against Normative Anthropocentrism

The arguments against normative anthropocentrism can be grouped in two, depending on whether they target patiency- or agency-based normative anthropocentrism.

3.2.1 Patiency-based Normative Anthropocentrism

There are at least three common arguments against patiency-based normative anthropocentrism.

The argument from individual organisms. These arguments appeal to the moral intuition that individual nonhuman organisms have intrinsic rather than instrumental value and hence should be considered subjects of moral concern. This kind of appeal is central to the plentiful injunctions at the forefront of contemporary environmental humanities to cultivate practices of caring and making kin[24] as well as mainstream environmental ethics.[25]

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[22] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 214.

[23] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 216.

[24] E.g., Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, and Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 103.

[25] See note 5.

The argument depends on the strength of the moral intuition that we should care for certain (or, perhaps, all) individual nonhuman organisms for their own sake. The intuition is rather common both among theorists and lay people, and the argument therefore gives good reason to reject all forms of patiency-based normative anthropocentrism since these only assign instrumental or indirect value to nonhumans.

The argument from ecosystems. Another type of argument appeals not to the idea that all individual organisms have intrinsic worth but that ecosystems do. This argument is most prominently found in the tradition of deep ecology and related views. Næss argues that we should not see individual organisms as isolated beings but as "knots in the biospherical net".[26] Many post-anthropocentrists implicitly appeal to this line of argument when they express their concern that anthropocentrism entails or allows an exploitative and destructive relation to nature at large, and when they call for a "relational ethics".[27] The key premise is that natural systems such as habitats, ecosystems, and a species' ecological niche have an intrinsic value over and above the individual organisms that populate them.

If we accept this premise, we are bound to reject all kinds of patiency-based normative anthropocentrism insofar as they only allow ecological wholes such as biotic communities and habitats to have instrumental value for human beings.

The patiency differentiation argument. You could also take issue with patiency-based normative anthropocentrism not because it excludes nonhuman beings from the moral community but because it conceals the normative differentiations that exist within the group of human beings itself. For example, Braidotti and Hlavajova argue that when the notion of the human glosses over the internal differentiation of the domain of human beings, it implicitly "indexes access to entitlements and power, values and norms, privileges and entitlements, rights and visibility".[28] Thereby, normative anthropocentrism arguably naturalizes and makes invisible the power structures and many types

[26] Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement," 95.

[27] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 169.

[28] Braidotti & Hlavajova, "Introduction," 11.

of oppressions and exploitation that divide human beings into different subgroups.

This argument does not work against weak patiency-based normative anthropocentrism since this position is compatible with the idea that only a subgroup of humans are moral patients, but the argument clearly works against strong and typified patiency-based normative anthropocentrism.

3.2.2 Agency-based Normative Anthropocentrism

There are two main arguments against agency-based normative anthropocentrism, where the latter can be reconstructed in two varieties.

Arguments from marginal cases. In the same vein as in Section 3.1, one might use arguments from marginal cases to dismiss strong agency-based normative anthropocentrism by pointing to human beings that are not appropriate targets of moral praise and blame such as infants, people who are intoxicated, or people suffering from severe mental illness. One could also argue against weak agency-based normative anthropocentrism if one can point to some individual nonhuman animals with abilities equivalent to those of human moral agents.

The nonhuman moral agency argument. Some post-anthropocentric authors deny that the category of moral agency can be restricted to the domain of human beings more generally. This argument also has a modest and a radical version.

The modest version claims on empirical grounds that some nonhuman animals form and participate in complex social practices where they exhibit social emotions tantamount to them praising or blaming each other.[29] Recall, something is a moral agent only if it is an appropriate target of moral praise and blame, so depending on our conceptions of moral praise and blame, these nonhuman animals are candidates for moral agency. Which exact form of agency-based normative anthropocentrism this argument challenges must hence be settled empirically.

The radical version argues on conceptual grounds against the claim that there should be something exceptional about human agency and responsibility. Instead, this version argues in favor of expanding these categories to include all organic life and, perhaps even, the non-organic. Haraway thus substitutes the

[29] For discussion, see Bekoff & Pierce, *Wild Justice*, and Rowlands, *Can Animals Be Moral?*.

humanistic conception of "responsibility" for "response-ability" and claims that response-ability characterizes all forms of life including that of vira.[30] Along similar lines, Barad writes, in continuity with her endorsement of the radical interdependence argument, that "[a]gency is not something that humans and even nonhumans have to varying degrees. [...] Furthermore, responsibility is not the exclusive right, obligation, or dominion of humans".[31] Summarizing the ethical implications of her agential realism, she writes that

> [n]ot only subjects but also objects are permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin, but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future. This is as true for electrons as it is for brittlestars as it is for the differentially constituted human. [...] We (but not only ''we humans'') are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails.[32]

The success of this argument depends on how we define moral agency. According to our definition, moral agents are appropriate targets of moral praise and blame. Now, there are several different conceptions of what constitutes appropriate praise and blame. Some think that blame is appropriate only when the blamed agent is responsive to reasons.[33] But one could also opt for a less demanding view where moral evaluation arises naturally from our sentiments. On this account, blame is simply the painful emotion we feel when faced with morally disagreeable actions, and it is appropriate when an ideal representative of the moral community would feel that emotion.[34] The plausibility of the nonhuman moral agency argument is inversely proportional to the demandingness of our conceptions of moral agency. If our conception of the latter is more demanding, more nonhuman beings are denied moral agency; if it is more permissive, more nonhuman beings will qualify as moral agents.

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[30] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 114.

[31] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 172.

[32] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 393.

[33] See e.g., Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and Fischer & Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control.*

[34] See e.g., Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays.*

It seems that the line between moral agents and other beings must be drawn somewhere, since few would claim that *all* beings are appropriate targets of moral praise and blame. This affects the plausibility of the two versions of the argument.

The modest version can accommodate this fact. It merely suggests that the category of moral agency is not a priori coextensive with the category of human beings and that its extension should be settled empirically. The radical version, however, fares worse. When claiming that brittlestars and electrons are responsible to others, Barad seems to claim that brittlestars and electrons are appropriate targets of moral praise and blame. This is implausible and speaks against the soundness of the radical nonhuman moral agency argument. Indeed, Barad occasionally acknowledges this and shies away from a radical extension of moral agency:

> Learning how to intra-act responsibly within and as part of the world means understanding that we are not the only active beings – though this is never justification for deflecting that responsibility onto other entities. The acknowledgment of 'nonhuman agency' does not lessen human accountability; on the contrary, it means that accountability requires that much more attentiveness to existing power asymmetries.[35]

Barad here argues that we should consider nonhuman entities to be agents, but that only human beings can be proper moral agents. The underlying assumption appears to be that if other entities were also moral agents, it would be equally appropriate to attribute responsibility to them. As we will argue in the next section, we take this line of argument to be more sensible than the radical nonhuman moral agency argument that Barad seems to endorse elsewhere. Be that as it may, Barad's endorsement of the radical interdependence argument makes it difficult to see how she can consistently hold on to the idea of "human accountability." If there is nothing special about Priyanka's relation to her driving, why would we hold her rather than the gas accountable for not being attentive to the "power asymmetries" between the Priyanka-car-gas complex

[35] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 178f.

and the toads that are being crushed by the car's tires and the many animals that are roasted by the slow emission of carbondioxide?[36]

3.3 Taking Stock

This section has shown that it requires careful reconstruction to map the exact types and subtypes of anthropocentrism targeted by the key post-anthropocentric arguments. The following table presents an overview of our discoveries. The table demonstrates the form of anthropocentrism you must logically reject if you endorse a specific type of post-anthropocentric argument. It does not, however, say anything about the soundness of these arguments.

	Type of post-anthropocentric argument	**Target anthropocentrism**
Against ontological anthropocentrism	The argument from marginal cases	Weak ontological anthropocentrism Strong ontological anthropocentrism
	The internal differentiation argument	Typified ontological anthropocentrism Strong ontological anthropocentrism
	The modest interdependence argument	No types of ontological anthropocentrism
	The radical interdependence argument	All types of ontological anthropocentrism
Against normative anthropocentrism	The argument from individual organisms	All forms of patiency-based normative anthropocentrism
	The argument from eco-systems	All forms of patiency-based normative anthropocentrism

[36] A related worry is that the idea of asymmetric power relations is incompatible with the radical interdependence argument since asymmetric power relations involve X having power over Y in some regard. If X has power over Y, X has an ability to do something to Y, where this means that X would do that thing to Y just in case X tried to do that thing. This means that although they surely affect both of its relata, power relations (and especially power asymmetries) only make sense if one of the relata possesses the ability to exercise that power.

	The patiency differentiation argument	Typified patiency-based normative anthropocentrism Strong patiency-based normative anthropocentrism
	Arguments from marginal cases	Weak agency-based normative anthropocentrism Strong agency-based normative anthropocentrism
	The modest nonhuman moral agency argument	The scope of this argument must be settled empirically
	The radical nonhuman moral agency argument	All forms of agency-based normative anthropocentrism

4 Ostensive Humanism and the Ethics of the Anthropocene

The barrage of arguments presented in Section 3 forces us to question many of the assumptions behind the different versions of anthropocentrism. However, we should hesitate to leave behind the category of the human as such, especially insofar as this puts into question the concept of human moral agency.[37] Insofar as contemporary critiques of anthropocentrism are motivated by an attempt to overcome interspecies injustice and remedy planetary exploitation, we must consider which agents are susceptible to or addressed by these injunctions. Who is the moral addressee of the Anthropocene?

It is unlikely that nonhumans are susceptible to these injunctions and hence blameworthy for not ending their own oppression and exploitation. As parts of a larger ethico-political project, critics of anthropocentrism therefore seem to indirectly confer upon human beings an exceptional moral responsibility. This is not to say, however, that the causal influence of humans on the planet by itself implies an exceptional moral responsibility. If this was so, one could also point out that photons and algae have an even larger causal impact on the Earth than humans. The point is rather that humans, not photons and algae, can be praised

[37] Somewhat in line with this, some post-antropocentrist authors, such as Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, and Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, adopt a more ameliorative than eliminative approach to the category of the human (see note 3 above). Braidotti even talks about a rethinking of the "basic unit of common reference for our species" (*The Posthuman*, 12) and a "new humanism" (*The Posthuman*, 195).

and blamed for adhering to or violating moral norms. In line with this, Kate Soper has noted the following:

> Unless human beings are differentiated from other organic and inorganic forms of being, they can be made no more liable for the effects of their occupancy of the eco-system than any other species, and it would make no sense to call upon cats to stop killing birds. Since any eco-politics, however dismissive of the superiority of *homo sapiens* over other species, accords humanity responsibilities for nature, it presumes the possession by human beings of attributes that set them apart from all other forms of life.[38]

We thus find ourselves at an impasse. On the one hand, we have numerous more or less plausible arguments against many forms of anthropocentrism. On the other hand, full-blown post-anthropocentrism – one rejecting all types of anthropocentrism – is undesirable since it requires us to deny that the moral agents to blame for interspecies injustice and the planetary predicament are paradigmatically human.

The task is hence to reconcile the idea that there might be no clear-cut distinction between the abilities of human and nonhuman animals with the idea that moral agency is paradigmatically human. This last section takes up this task. In doing so, we shall outline a new kind of anthropocentrism or humanism. The idea is to reject the anthropocentric assumption that some ability is exclusively or uniformly possessed by human beings without giving in to the suggestion that the human shall or can be entirely decentered or bracketed. In short, we suggest that some abilities are necessary for moral agency and that these are paradigmatically (but not exclusively and not uniformly) possessed by human beings.

The ethical demands to end interspecies injustice and the destruction of ecosystems are intelligible only if we presuppose that some beings are in principle susceptible to them. Otherwise, it would be highly inappropriate to praise or blame anyone for satisfying or flouting them. Following this, the ethical demands underlying post-anthropocentrism implicitly point to a kind of moral agency. But considering just how daunting the demands to end interspecies injustice or mitigate climate change are, they are surely beyond the

[38] Soper, *What is Nature?*, 160.

abilities of electrons and brittlestars. Without specifying the exact abilities that are necessary for being susceptible to this ethical demand and without saying anything about its exact extension, it is nonetheless possible to say something about the possible addressee of this appeal, the exemplary being that it points towards. For the simple reason that it is nonsensical to blame anyone else, the main addressee of this appeal is human. This, we take it, is one reason why it makes sense to call our geological epoch the Anthropocene.

The term Anthropocene has itself been criticized for being anthropocentric. It is especially vulnerable to varieties of the differentiation arguments claiming that there is no typical human being and that it does not make sense to distribute blame evenly across humanity, when it is in fact only a small sub-group of human beings who are responsible for, say, the vast majority of carbon emissions. At this point, however, it is important to distinguish between backward-looking and forward-looking responsibility. Backward-looking responsibility is a *whodunit*-responsibility that seeks to place blame in accord with past wrongdoings. Forward-looking responsibility, in contrast, is a *whatcha gonna do*-responsibility concerned with identifying someone who, independently of past wrongdoings, is responsible for remedying harm. If the moral injunction of the Anthropocene is backward-looking, the term is a misnomer for the reasons listed above. If, however, it is forward-looking, it appears apt. For even if we do not want to restrict the category of moral agency to human beings on an a priori basis, the moral agents addressed by the proclamation of the Anthropocene (and, indirectly, in the critiques of anthropocentrism) remain paradigmatically human.

Our new humanism accommodates this without succumbing to the problems of traditional anthropocentrism. We do not claim that *all* human beings, *only* human beings, or *species-typical* human beings are moral agents. Instead, the anthropocentrism implicit in this moral appeal is *ostensive* in the sense that it implicitly *points to* or *addresses* a being with certain morally relevant abilities. And even if we do not know which exact abilities characterize this being nor the exact extension of the relevant kind of being, we still understand the moral appeal well enough to point towards paradigmatic instances of this kind of moral agency. As Wittgenstein said, "the ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear".[39] We suggest that we know the "place in language, in grammar" of this

[39] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 14.

moral appeal well enough to realize that it is addressed, first and foremost, to humans.

Ostensive humanism differs from traditional anthropocentrism on two counts. First, in contrast to typified (and strong) anthropocentrism, it does not stipulate that the typical human is thus and so. It merely suggests that *some* humans are among those moral agents pointed out by the ethical demand of the Anthropocene. Second, in contrast to weak ontological anthropocentrism, it does not stipulate that *only* human beings are moral agents in this sense. The extension is left open-ended.[40]

The performative contradiction of some forms of post-anthropocentrism is that they explicitly denounce anthropocentrism while they remain implicitly committed to ostensive humanism. Formally speaking, ostensive humanism is committed to two forms of anthropocentrism:

> *Ostensive normative anthropocentrism*: The moral agent ostensively picked out by the ethical demand of the Anthropocene is first and foremost human.
>
> *Ostensive ontological anthropocentrism*: The abilities that render an entity susceptible to the ethical demand of the Anthropocene are possessed by some human beings.

Ostensive humanism leaves the intension and the extension of the relevant kind of moral agency open-ended. It does not and need not say which exact abilities are necessary and sufficient to render a being susceptible to the ethical demand of the Anthropocene, and it does not and need not say exactly who possesses this kind of moral agency to be intelligible. It merely says that the ethical demand of the Anthropocene is intelligible enough for us to pick out its paradigmatic addressees.

[40] See also Hamilton's "new anthropocentrism": "We look across the unbridgeable gulf that separates us from all other beings; it is the gulf of responsibility. We have it; they don't" (*Defiant Earth*, 53). On this point, Hamilton agrees with Soper ("The Humanism in Posthumanism"). In contrast to Hamilton and Soper, however, we do not assume that the "we" of responsibility is coextensive with the domain of human beings.

5 Conclusion

To disambiguate the concept, we have distinguished between two types and nine subtypes of anthropocentrism. Although we were unable to find a single knockdown argument effective against all of these, our overview and assessment of the main arguments against anthropocentrism have shown that there might be good reasons to reject the idea that humans are (ontologically and/or normatively) distinct from the rest of nature.

However, the critique of anthropocentrism also carries with it a moral address. Who is the addressee of this address? It seems to us that this address points, first and foremost, to the human. If this is so, post-anthropocentrism is performatively anthropocentric in some minimal sense. In spelling out this minimal anthropocentrism, we have developed the position of ostensive humanism. Ostensive humanism is compatible with most of the incentives of post-anthropocentric thinking but acknowledges that the ethical demand of the Anthropocene points to a kind of moral agency that is paradigmatically human.

It might turn out that the abilities necessary to be a moral agent in this sense are fairly close to some of those invoked by traditional anthropocentric conceptions of moral agency, for example the abilities to deliberate, communicate, and reason abstractly. It could also turn out to be less demanding abilities such as the ability to empathize with suffering others and the ability to act in a way that remedies that suffering. Maybe the relevant abilities come in degrees. These intensional questions cannot be settled here. Yet, only when we have answers to them, does it make sense to try and fix the exact extension of the relevant kind of moral agency. Only then can we try to determine whether nonhuman beings and species-typical humans are moral agents in the relevant sense. Our suggestion is, however, that in answering these questions, we cannot bracket the concept of the human. On the contrary, at the moral juncture of the Anthropocene, we must operate from the assumption of human responsibility and thus be ostensively anthropocentric.

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