**Human history in the age of the Anthropocene**

A defence of the nature/culture distinction



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*A legacy of Enlightenment thought was to see the human as separate from nature. Human history was neatly distinguished from natural history. The age of Anthropocene has now put all that into question. This human exceptionalism is seen by some as responsible for the devastating impact humans have had on the planet. But if we give up on the nature / culture distinction and see human activity as just another type of natural process, we risk losing our ability to attribute moral agency and responsibility to humanity for the environmental crisis, argues Giuseppina D’Oro.*

Traditionally the history of nature has been conducted in relative isolation from the history of civilizations. Humans have been studied in different ways by, for example, palaeontologists and “historians”. Palaeontologists have mapped the evolution of *homo sapiens* through the study of its fossilized remains, just as they mapped the evolutionary history of other animal species. Historians, by contrast, have explained the events of the past in the light of the norms of conduct by which past agents led their lives and, in so doing, given us access to radically different ways in which “humans” have understood themselves and their standing in the world.

Recently this division of labour between scientific and humanistic disciplines has come under pressure as the assumption that there are two different senses of the term “human” has been challenged for resting on questionable anthropocentric assumptions which elevate humans above the rest of nature.  Humans, it is argued, are *natural* beings who are responsible for global warming, just as cows are through methane emissions, only to a greater and much more devastating extent. The causal impact of human activities on global warming has reached such proportions as to prompt some to claim that we are entering a new geological era, the so-called Anthropocene, an era in which the effects of human activities on the environment are comparable to the climatic changes caused by the impact of a meteorite, changes believed to have led to the extinction of the dinosaurs. As humans become aware of their causal powers, they also become aware of being *natural* forces, whose agency is not distinct in kind from that of lightning, flooding or volcanic explosions. In its attempt to overcome human exceptionalism, however, this view ends up stripping human beings of agency, seeing them as simply another causal force in nature, and exculpating them from their moral responsibility in bringing about the climate crisis of the Anthropocene.

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**A new context for old distinctions**

It’s a legacy of philosophers such as Kant and Hegel that natural history and what is ordinarily called simply “history”, are different kinds of inquiries, which serve distinctive explanatory purposes. While they both help us understanding who our ancestors are, and how we got to where we are now, they do so in different ways. An evolutionary history of humans might, for example, be able to tell us why we are prone to develop certain diseases. History (in the sense in which the word is used without adding qualifications such as “natural” or “evolutionary”), has given us an insight into the conceptions of the world and the self-conceptions of the ancient Egyptians, Japanese Samurais, and so on. The location of these disciplines in different faculties reflected the assumption that there is an important division of labour between these historians. For although they are both concerned with the past, they are concerned with it in different ways because they are looking for answers to different kinds of questions.

As the distinction between the two senses of “human” has come under pressure, so has the idea that there are radically different ways of investigating and explaining what happened in the past, that what goes under the name of history *simpliciter* has a subject matter that differs from that of “evolutionary” or “natural” history. The objection to the idea that there two different kinds of past is not based simply on the observation that increasing specialization has led to an over-compartmentalization of knowledge that sometimes limits possibilities for inter-disciplinary cooperation. It is based rather on the more radical suggestion that the division of labour between science and the humanities is built on a false dichotomy between nature and culture. The criticism therefore ensues in a call to reject the disciplinary boundaries between the sciences and the humanities rather than in the exhortation to intensify collaboration between researchers in different academic departments. This is why the question as to whether human history should be understood as separate to natural history arises in the first instance: if there were no distinction between the two senses of “human” that we have outlined, then there would also be no distinction between humanistically oriented history and natural history, history as written by the historian of ancient Rome, and history as written by the palaeontologist.

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To avoid any misunderstandings: the traditional view of the relationship between these different kinds of history did not entail that the sciences and the humanities cannot be mutually supportive. On the contrary they often intersect: the results achieved in one field can support research and advance progress in the other. The findings of forensic archaeologists carrying out DNA analysis of fossilized human remains, for example, can help historians to establish the line of descent of a king. At the other end, historians may be able to guide archaeologists as to where to conduct further excavations. But although these two kinds of history intersect, they address different kinds of questions. This is why one finds palaeontologists in the faculty of natural sciences and Egyptologists or Roman historians in humanities. It is this traditional model of interdisciplinary collaboration, according to which different forms of inquiry can be both distinct and mutually supportive, that is being challenged by those who question that there are different senses of the term “human” which reflect the different concerns of scientific and humanistic pursuits. The proposal to undo the distinction between the two different senses of “human”, therefore, amounts to a call to abolish the disciplinary boundaries between the natural sciences and the humanities.

The attack on the idea that there is a sense of “human” that is distinct from and irreducible to the biological sense of the term has been partly prompted by the environmental crisis. Confronting the environmental crisis, so the argument goes, requires rethinking, at a very fundamental level, the categories used to divide up reality that have been inherited from modernity, the nature/culture distinction in particular. It is because human beings see themselves as standing above nature that they fail to realize the causal impact of their activities on the natural world. It is only when humans are understood as part of nature that they can also be seen as catalysts for climate change, just as yeast is a catalyst in the process of fermentation. Recognizing the causal impact of anthropogenic emissions in global warming, on this view, requires denying that there is a distinctive sense of “agency” that belongs to “humans” qua historical beings. It requires adopting an undifferentiated notion of “agent” that includes, for example, yeast, the Covid-19 virus and Greta Thunberg alike. On this account, the nature/culture distinction becomes the felon that needs to be excised.

**In defence of the nature/culture distinction**

The environmental crisis is real, but it is far from clear that the appropriate response to it is to find a villain to blame in the nature/culture distinction and to undermine the notion of “human” agency that is presupposed by a humanistic approach to the past. The view that there is a distinctive sense of what it means to be human is needed not merely to defend the disciplinary boundaries between a humanistically oriented historiography and natural history: If there were no distinct *historical* past, then there would be no distinct *historical* future either; global warming would be just as inevitable as the processes of fermentation and condensation, or any other natural phenomenon. To deny that there is a distinctive sense of what it means to be human that isn’t reducible to the biological sense is therefore also to deny that it is possible to change the norms by which humans, qua historical beings, lead their lives, thereby encouraging a peculiar kind of fatalism, one that is born out of a naturalist creed, rather than out of the belief in divine providence. If there is no nature/culture distinction, the events of the future are to be predicted in the same way in which a meteorologist predicts the weather, rather than shaped through political intervention, for the latter implies a more robust notion of agency than the one that is left over once the distinction between the subject matter of the humanities and natural sciences are obliterated.

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The reluctance to recognize these two senses of “human” is often fuelled by the perception that the distinction entails a commitment to speciesism  - a form of discrimination based on one’s biological species -  but this is a misconception. The Mesopotamians and the ancient Egyptians didn’t make it into the history books on account of their superior biology. They are of interest to the humanistically oriented historian *not* in so far as they are biological humans, but in so far as they built a civilization.  If the Slitheen, the Time Lords, and the Silurians had not been alien fictional creatures in the TV series Dr Who, but ancient civilizations predating the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, they would be appropriate subject matter for the humanistic historian even if they did not belong to the biological species ‘human’. What the distinction between the two sense of “human” does imply, however, is that the burden of moral responsibility falls on those beings who have historical agency. Undoing the nature/culture distinction lifts the burden of moral responsibility: if humans are merely natural beings, then they cannot be *morally and politically responsible* for the environmental effects they bring about. They are merely causally responsible for global warming, just as the yeast is causally responsible for fermentation. Blaming political apathy would require invoking the very sense of humanity which is being put into question. Collapsing the two senses of being “human” pulls the rug from under the feet of those who fight for environmental change because, for this *nouveaux* naturalism, such activists can at best be described as responding to the climate crisis in the way in which the immune system of an organism fights a virus. They cannot be described as engaging in the battle of ideas.

Science has been very successful in telling us what *will* happen if carbon emissions continue at present levels. What it cannot tell us is whether what will happen, unless prevented, *should* happen. The question as to whether it *should* is a question that can be addressed only by the kind of being who is “human” in the sense in which it is relevant to the humanities, i.e., as the kind of being who can interrogate its understanding of reality and self-understanding. The sense of “human” that is relevant to the humanities should not be turned into a scapegoat: it is key to addressing the environmental crisis.

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