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On Ethics in the Anthropocene: Our Earth, Legacy-Building, and Catholicism

It has been proposed that we may be entering a new epoch, an entirely new span of time, called the Anthropocene. The official designation is still under deliberation by the Quaternary Subcommission on Stratigraphy. Although in this state of limbo, the term “Anthropocene” has been utilized in a variety of ways depending on the field of study (Davies, 55). In this essay, the Anthropocene refers to a “geological epoch-in-the-making” (Szerszynski, 111). One reason it is distinct from previous epochs is because it is a period in which *humans* have become a geological force on the Earth. In the process, the fragile balance of the Holocene, which sustains humans and other species of life, has been endangered (Davies, 149). This provides ample room for reflection on what it means to be time-bound as humans, and how it affects our ethical presuppositions.

I begin this reflection by noting that human beings are the sort to leave traces, and to do so intentionally. Picture for a moment the locks adorning the Pont des Arts in Paris, the words scattered over the wet pavement, the names carved on trees along the local hiking trail, the statue in the town square, or the baby footprints on a proud parent’s wall. We are a legacy-driven species. We, perhaps with another level of intensity and for distinct reasons than the other beings on this planet, long for something to outlast us. The name triumphantly scrawled on top of a rock-climbing wall and the alumnus’s name emblazoned across the campus library are examples of this being done on the individual or family level. I wonder if it is possible for this to be examined from a broader, macro level and in so doing, aid us in conceiving of ‘humanity’ as one in the Anthropocene.

We human beings leave intentional traces. In one sense, we can hardly be blamed for wanting this long-term endurance of acknowledgement. But in another, it is very possible that as we flock in pursuit of this acknowledgement and scramble to establish our eternity in purely

material avenues, we blight the very Earth we hope will carry our traces forever. My thesis is that our ethics in the Anthropocene should account for this.

Take as an example, the Pont des Arts, where this was overlooked. One lock secured on the bridge by a lover gazing into his beloved's eyes was not a problem. A million locks, weighing 45 tons together, *were*. Consequently, they were removed from the bridge wholesale in 2015 (Willsher). This expression of endurance in time, normal for a human being, had become destructive and destabilizing. Perhaps it had never been a good expression of it in the first place, as even one key tossed in the Seine (a frequent part of the tradition), could harm the ecosystem below. Even so, one key in the Seine and one lock on the Pont des Arts were almost undetectable compared with the onslaught of keys that were tossed and the hundreds of thousands of locks that were attached. This leap from the individual action and its repercussions to those of the collective is highly relevant to the conversation surrounding the Anthropocene Epoch.

Our ethical frameworks are undoubtedly challenged in the Anthropocene; there is plenty of uncertainty about what will become of them... and what will become of us. But Christ said, "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (Matthew 7:24). Christ goes on to say that although storms set in, the house built on rock, "... did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock" (Matthew 7:25). While all else passed away, the house remained. The 'passing away' is comparable to the non-eternal, as the 'remaining' is to the eternal. Thus, as conditions external to us change and shift precariously, we can endure, if the rock upon which we have built is stable, surefire, reliable, and continuing.

It just so happens that rock also has this connection to time in the findings of the environmental and Earth sciences and this has become clearer in the Anthropocene: "Overwhelming evidence now confirms that humans are changing the Earth in unprecedented

ways. Global climate change, acidifying oceans, shifting global cycles of carbon, nitrogen, and other elements, forests and other natural habitats transformed into farms and cities, widespread pollution, radioactive fallout, plastic accumulation... These are just some of the many different human-induced global environment changes that that will most likely leave a lasting record in rock: the basis for marking new intervals of geologic time” (Ellis 2-3). This not only challenges our ethical frameworks to account for this level of responsibility and damage produced on the human level but also challenges our conception of what acceptable, ethical expressions of legacy-building are. What enduring marks do we leave behind?

The concept of being creatures that openly seek what is lasting rose to the fore recently as I saw a friend act in his role as thurifer at Fordham’s Praise and Worship. Incense rose and spread its aromatic smokiness in all directions. Its stubborn scent, when I am close enough, settles in my hair and remains there until the next time I wash it (which makes me reluctant to do so). Incense has a valuable purpose in the Catholic faith. As I watched that night, I recognized in it this deep-seated tendency of the human person: a sort of call, extended just as the smoke was. Strikingly, the instances I have seen incense in are communal: when the smoke rises from the altar, it is as if we as a community make our cries directly to God, “We are here! Remember us. Hear us. Answer us.”

Consider the scholars who taught that unresolved conflicts and deprivations in early life, often regarding the core familial relationships a child should have, could have lasting repercussions. I propose that these, colloquially categorized as ‘parent-figure issues’, can be taken a step further. At the root of each desire for acknowledgement and approval is not just one’s mother, father, role model, or guardian. It is God our parent, with Whom at times we try to connect with through our relationship with others. As God is eternal and outside of time, the acknowledgement and approval we seek is not really temporal. Yet we spend our time carving various remembrances

of ourselves into the Earth and seeking human approval, which provides only temporal satisfaction¹.

We long for eternal acknowledgement and to rest in eternal approval. But we are frenetic and restless, always chasing, even after it is offered by something or someone, because they can't—much as they may desire it—give what we seek: loving acknowledgement and true approval in its eternal form. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (Saint Augustine). And so, the praise your friend bestows fades, just as the locks were unclipped from the bridge in Paris, as the shower washes out the incense scent, and as the library is renamed for a more recent alumnus². Seeking these as if they were to satisfy, then, is damaging and fruitless. It batters our hearts and our hopes. We seek something good and necessary, but we seek it in the wrong places.

I propose that the Anthropocene shows this beyond the individual by mapping it onto the scale of our human species. Plastic in rock sediment can be an example to illustrate this, as it is often seen as representative of human impact on earth. It is like our modern-day Tower of Babel: representative of a long-term project that most humans have contributed to. Rather than reaching for the heavens it reaches for deeper, lower ground. We humans may have done this on our quest for prestige, comfort, acknowledgement, power, control, approval, and significance. But God may very well say to us, “You don't need to behave in this way for me to recognize and see you.”

If this is so, when we feel at our most finite, forgettable, overlooked, and alone, we can remember that God tells us, “See, upon the palms of my hands I have engraved you... Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will

¹ These figures are eternal souls, but they are not dispensers of the eternal. The eternal was bestowed on each of them at their creation and is in their very being, but not through their own power.

² Here, it can be noted that these physical, emotional, and social manifestations likely have varying levels of significance and endurance, although they are at times grouped together in this paper. I do not mean to suggest that a charitable word from a friend is on the same level or has the same impact as something more material, like the locks.

never forget you” (Isaiah 49:15-16). Even if the locks are moved and the library renamed, even if your handprint is lost and your statue rusted beyond recognition, even if your writing is paved over and covered by a fresh coat of paint, even then, your name can remain in eternity if it is written in Heaven.

Lastly, it is worth drawing attention to the degree of animosity that is sometimes felt towards those that are believed to have been more responsible for the environmental degradation and accompanying harms of the Anthropocene. What would happen if we advanced with the ethical imperative that each person, including those people, should be given charitable acknowledgement, *whilst* directing them towards the true source for healing and redemptive change³? Poor or rich, young or old, accompanied or alone, we all cry out, “I am here!” Perhaps if we work from this, we will have productive dialogue on the environment rather than stonewalling and deflected questions. It is possible the phenomenon discussed here—our quest for lastingness and acknowledgement—runs as an undercurrent to the reasons why our world is in its current state.

As humans at the helm of the Anthropocene, let us build on rock. But let us make sure the rock we choose bears what we actually want it to (remember, this is akin to the legacy of all humanity!), and that the rock we choose is not just something that out-exists our lifetimes, but that exists eternally. In the Anthropocene, we get to explore the connections between legacy-building, our Earth, and Catholicism in a fresh way. This is a profoundly significant time in ethical decision making for humans as a whole. May we value the opportunity and give it the proper attention. And in the process, may we together discover what it means to be one humanity.

³ Admittedly, there are many, multifaceted reasons for lack of dialogue and action on climate in the Anthropocene, just as there are many reasons why people have brazenly and knowingly harmed our environment. In addition, I am not suggesting that say, the individual who carves his name into a tree to receive recognition and praise is doing the same thing that a power-hungry business leader is when he allows pollution to be released into the air. The former is more directly giving into a sort of legacy-building act that the person overlooking pollution limits seems not to be so preoccupied with. However, perhaps the disregard for the environment and the lack of care for the others in the latter person’s case stem from this search for the eternal acknowledgement, even if it is not clear to the person himself that this is what motivates his reckless behavior. In an indirect way, then, perhaps the same desire is present in both cases, but manifested differently.

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