

Depending on Something Bigger

It has often been pointed out that acknowledging dependence on some larger reality and accommodating to it requires a degree of humility. It does not require a total denial of self-regard or relinquishment of personal agency. It does require that we do not take ourselves to be in any fundamental way the be-all and end-all of the world. From this perspective, as from others, the conceptual resources used to frame our understanding of our situation are of the first importance. Ideas, theories and intellectual models may be attractive and useful in some ways yet serve to obscure a larger picture of dependence. At least in part their attractiveness might lie precisely in their ability to do this; to boost self-regard and feelings of self-importance and power beyond what is consistent with a proper humility. There can be a pleasure in delusional arrogance that is presumably to be resisted. If so, and we are committed to scrutinising proposed frameworks of understanding for signs of the presence or absence of such resistance, then this constitutes a frame, or, if you like, a meta-frame, in its own right. It's not as if this has no application or work to do.

Forms of dependence touched upon by the contributors to this issue include the reliance of human well-being and flourishing on ecosystems and biodiversity (Deliège and Neuteleers 2015, Hannis 2015); the contingency of the consequences of our actions on a bewildering array of fragmented and non-linear causal processes (Di Paola 2015); the foundational importance of ecologically informed natural aesthetics to an adequate environmental ethic (Varandas 2015); and the importance of adequate pathways and process of social memory to improving community resilience in the face of internal and external disturbances (Wilson 2015).

Mike Hannis considers acknowledgement of ecological dependence in terms of virtue, drawing upon Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the virtues of acknowledged dependence. Central to this picture is the notion of autonomy as the virtuous mean between the vices of heteronomy and arrogant self-sufficiency. The real freedom of flourishing individuals consists in expressing one's developing identity as something neither coercively determined nor arbitrarily chosen. One's developing identity – who one is – depends on a network of social – and, Hannis emphasises, ecological – relations. Acknowledging this dependency is a requirement of autonomous flourishing. For Hannis virtues of acknowledged ecological dependence are those that, like humility, are opposed to and threatened by character traits such as arrogance and the pride, envy, greed, intemperance, selfishness and indifference underlying ecologically unsustainable consumerism.

Glenn Deliège and Stijn Neuteleers consider ecosystem arguments (ESAs) for biodiversity. Human wellbeing depends on a wide range of services delivered by ecosystems that exhibit biodiversity. Deliège and Neuteleers argue that early versions of ESA mounted by conservation biologists were not

functionalist in orientation. Emphasising the respect we owe to nature in virtue of its scale, complexity and our utter dependence on it they highlighted individual ecosystem 'services' as clues to this ecological insight, rather than viewing them as distinct services to be monetised. Yet functionalist versions of ESA have come to dominate preservation debates. In monetising them, treating them as in principle substitutable and amenable to technological efficiency enhancements, these arguments assimilate the services to the economy, undermining and crowding out the more respectful acknowledgement of dependence as a motivation for preservation. Such arguments, and the economic picture they presuppose, risk undermining the original preservationist project, or turning it into something else.

Perhaps they are turning it into a New Human Era management project. In the third paper of this issue Marcello Di Paolo responds to Dale Jamieson's call for a new ethics for the Anthropocene by sketching a virtue ethic with which to negotiate problems posed by the massive scale and complexity of anthropogenic impacts on Earth systems. The most appropriate form of environmental protection in the Anthropocene context, he argues, is a type of virtuous stewardship exemplified in food-producing urban gardening. Such gardening helps inculcate 'mindfulness' understood as the disposition to consider and take responsibility for the outcomes and implications of our behaviour even though these are spatio-temporally diffuse. This is important in the context of climate change and other environmental impacts involving non-linear causation and fragmentation of responsibility. The mindful person knows she is imputable for actions she only contributes to alongside other agents and natural processes. She has access to the source of meaning and value that is the acknowledgement of her 'place in a wider working of things'. 'Cheerfulness' is another important virtue Di Paola explains as a gardening virtue for the Anthropocene. The cheerful person resolutely affirms her freedom and dignity by relishing short-lived, local success in tasks that are never-ending, as their renewal is necessitated by her own efforts in dealing with them. One weeds the garden and in weeding contributes to the need for further weeding (by spreading the seeds), and so on. Reading di Paola's impressive discussion of this I wondered why the focus should be gardening rather than, say, housework: one dusts and in dusting sheds the skin that will necessitate further dusting, and so on. Yet one resolves to do it anyway. At least partly the point is that in gardening we are more obviously 'working with nature' to produce a congenial outcome, mindful that the outcome is contingent on more than our own agency. This makes me question the Anthropocene frame, the labelling of the current era in planetary history after our own species. If we do in fact remain dependent on natural systems, their continued operation remaining a condition of our own agency, then framing the overall context as one produced by specifically human agency seems to risk obscuring the insight of dependency and crowding out consideration of the (remaining) natural components. This

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is not to deny the importance of Di Paola's insights into the virtues required by our situation, which seem to me to be considerable, but to worry about the consequences of the overarching Anthropocene framing.¹

Maria José Varandas brings non-anthropogenic nature front and centre in a discussion of the relation between natural aesthetics and an adequate environmental ethic. She considers the work of three major environmental thinkers – Leopold, Callicott and Rolston – and shows how the latter two developed the former's insights into the aesthetic basis of a non-anthropocentric land ethic. She particularly follows Rolston's objectivism about value and cognitivist aesthetic orientation. The value of nature is not a projection of human subjectivity; it is 'carried by nature'. Aesthetic appreciation of nature is not the appreciation of a static or passive art object but occurs in the light of ecological knowledge of the indefinitely complex interrelated diversity of the natural world and its evolved and evolving dynamic symmetries. Although the experience of natural beauty occurs within the human being as its privileged observer the human appreciator of natural beauty is herself within the natural world, and her aesthetic perspective unifies her knowledge, sensibility and practice regarding that wider interconnected world. Ethically adequate action 'stems from this communitarian texture' as the agent is 'visibly and invisibly surrounded by well-placed beauty and deeply concerned to save it' (p. 223).

Our environmental situation requires us to draw upon resources critically and carefully. We depend upon resources made available by past endeavours. In the final paper Geoff Wilson discusses the developing discourse of 'resilience' that seems to be replacing that of 'sustainability'. He considers from a human geography perspective the role of social memory in enhancing or diminishing community resilience, understood as both adaptive capacity and a dynamic process involving community learning and willingness to take responsibility and control over development as well as social memory. The latter involves rites, traditions, taboos and social learning processes relating the community to past events and experiences of dealing and failing to deal with disturbances. Wilson unpicks some of the complexity of a picture relating community resilience to the maintenance, loss and rediscovery of social memory. Not all remembered practices are environmentally benign, of course, and 'many communities are "locked" into pathways of vulnerability', but Wilson suggests there is 'often a direct link between social memory enhancing resilience and strong economic, social and natural capital at community level' (p. 253). I imagine that one of the things that community resilience depends upon is memory of dependence upon something bigger.

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1. It is worth noting that Jamieson's earlier discussions of the 'green virtues' required by our situation, including mindfulness, were no less pertinent and powerful for making no mention of the Anthropocene. See Jamieson 2007.

References

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