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Lisa Sideris

Anthropocene Convergences: A Report from the Field

Dipesh Chakrabarty proposes that anthropogenic climate change presents scholars with a novel and daunting set of imperatives. It requires, among other adjustments, that we think and work across incommensurable timescales and disciplinary regimes. We must learn to “mix together immiscible chronologies,” as well as “rise above [our] disciplinary prejudices.”¹ Our situation is not without precedent, for the idea that humans might act as geological agents is not completely new.² Moreover, explaining such watershed events as the agricultural revolution of 10,000 years ago similarly required a convergence of diverse timescales and disciplines of geology, archeology, and history.³ Still, the idea of humans as a *geophysical* force akin to a dinosaur-decimating asteroid is something new under the sun. And as disciplinary mergers go, it is one thing to put historians in touch with geology but quite another to expect a scholar of postcolonial or subaltern studies to engage in meaningful and mutually respectful dialogue with an evolutionary biologist—particularly (let us say) a *sociobiologist* in the thrall of Enlightenment positivism and the quest for universal “laws” of human nature.⁴

Here, I focus on Chakrabarty’s invitation to blend immiscible timeframes and disciplines, primarily with reference to movements afoot in my own discipline of religious studies and adjacent fields. My aim is not so much to register disagreement with Chakrabarty’s portrait of the Anthropocene and what it signifies as to present some sobering examples of how this invitation is being received and enacted, and why no single discipline can define for us what it means to be human in the Age of the Human.

1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 220, 215.

2 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Geophysical Agency of Humans and Climate Change,” *Global Energy Affairs*, 19 September 2013, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://globalenergyinitiative.org/insights/161-climate-change-and-the-geophysical-agency-of-humans.html>.

3 Chakrabarty, “Four Theses,” 219.

4 Here I refer to E. O. Wilson, whose ideas Chakrabarty invokes. Some may object to my invocation of sociobiology, given Wilson’s move to embrace group selection theory, but Wilson has never broken with the basic dogma that such complex behaviors as morality, religion, and artistic expression are fundamentally biological in nature.

Thinking Like a Species

Anthropogenic climate change, and the attendant onset of humans' geological agency, entails a new understanding of humans as a collective entity, a species.⁵ Species-level thinking—a concept Chakrabarty attributes to E. O. Wilson, among others—works hand-in-glove with a turn to deep history. As Chakrabarty notes, Wilson believes that deep-historical perspectives—which move across large spans of time—and species thinking are both necessary if humans are to survive into the future. I want to pick up this strand of Chakrabarty's engagement with Wilson and consider its implications for developing a genuinely interdisciplinary dialogue around the Anthropocene and what it means to conceive of ourselves as a species.

“No single discipline can define for us what it means to be human in the Age of the Human.”

Thinking big is currently in vogue, but deep-historical and species-level thinking—even an incipient Anthropocene concept—have been knocking around my discipline for decades. For example, in 1992 in a book immodestly entitled *The Universe Story*, Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and religion scholar who referred to himself as a “geologist,” and his protégé, a mathematical cosmologist named Brian Swimme, predicted that “in the future the Earth will function differently than it has functioned in the past.” In this emerging era, the “entire complex of life systems of the planet will be influenced by the human in a comprehensive manner.”⁶ They envision a fourth geological era to follow the Paleozoic, the Mesozoic, and the Cenozoic, and optimistically christen it the “Ecozoic,”⁷ a period marked by “mutually enhancing human-Earth relations” and by recognition that our species now occupies the geological driver's seat.⁸

Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald argue convincingly that there are no genuine precursors to the Anthropocene, which they define as a sudden (not incremental) and dangerous shift, a radical rupture in Earth history as well as in the very idea of evolu-

5 Chakrabarty, “Four Theses.”

6 Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).

7 The Ecozoic is posited not as an epoch but an era of much longer duration.

8 Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 280.

tionary “advance to a higher stage.”⁹ However, I think there *are* precursors to the idea of a “good Anthropocene.” Indeed, some Anthropocene lookalikes rejected by Hamilton and Grinevald bear the earmarks; the Ecozoic is one candidate. Proponents of a good Anthropocene typically also regard the planetary crisis as a grand adventure, an exciting challenge that can be met by human ingenuity and smart technology, and—controversially—by jettisoning traditional approaches to wilderness conservation while welcoming engineering strategies for the planet and its lifeforms.¹⁰

Swimme and Berry’s confident appraisal of the coming Ecozoic is nurtured by a belief that the universe purposefully gropes its way towards consciousness. Theirs is an anthropic universe: the emergence of a self-reflective species such as our own was implicit in the unfolding of the universe from its inception. A pivotal moment for the cosmos is when humans emerge as the supreme consciousness of the universe, and—even more specifically—when we begin to reflect on ourselves as a species. Humans have often conceived of themselves as cultures, ethnic groups, or international organizations, Swimme and Berry note, but “what we seldom think about is the human as species.”¹¹ We must “reinvent the human at the species level,” fully and reflectively embracing that we are an interdependent species.¹²

These ideas have percolated from the musings of French paleontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), a key mentor to Swimme and Berry and, incidentally, a personal hero to Anthropocene booster Andrew C. Revkin.¹³ Teilhard understood our planet to unfold in a series of developmental layers or envelopes: lithosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and finally and most significantly, the noösphere, which is an additional, *thinking* layer beyond the biosphere, an evolutionary stage driven by the human phenomenon. The noösphere begins to transform the biosphere, acting as a kind

9 Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 59.

10 See, for example, Andrew C. Revkin, “Exploring Academia’s Role in Charting Paths to a ‘Good’ Anthropocene,” *New York Times*, 16 June 2014, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/exploring-academias-role-in-charting-paths-to-a-good-anthropocene/>. See also Clive Hamilton’s reply: “The Delusion of the ‘Good Anthropocene’: A Reply to Andrew Revkin,” *CliveHamilton.com*, 17 June 2014, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://clivehamilton.com/the-delusion-of-the-good-anthropocene-reply-to-andrew-revkin/>.

11 Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 259.

12 Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 117.

13 Andrew C. Revkin, “Teilhard de Chardin’s ‘Planetary Mind’ and our Spiritual Evolution,” *On Being* with Krista Tippett, 23 January 2014, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/teilhard-de-chardins-planetary-mind-and-our-spiritual-evolution/4965>.

of planetary or communal mind; our species begins to direct the course of evolutionary unfolding. While Swimme and Berry remain on guard against the extreme techno-optimism characterizing Teilhard's thought, an unmistakable sense of celebration attends the Ecozoic moment when humans take hold of the evolutionary reins. In short, there are many resonances between the noösphere and the Ecozoic, and between both concepts and the good Anthropocene.

A Common Story

The Universe Story is one of a handful of projects that narrate, in quasi-mythic form, the entire cosmic history, from the Big Bang to the dawn of our global environmental crisis. A variety of grandiose names are appended to these narratives—The Epic of Evolution, The Great Story, or Big History.¹⁴ These projects blend human and cosmic history (as well as science and religion) into a comprehensive common story that properly emplaces humans in the cosmos. One recent iteration is a multimedia phenomenon called “Journey of the Universe” launched by the abovementioned Swimme together with religion scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker. As with Swimme and Berry's narrative, a central claim is that humans represent the universe becoming conscious of itself.¹⁵ Interestingly, it is E. O. Wilson who coined the phrase “Epic of Evolution,” and many a cosmic storyteller regards him as an architect of a new cosmology that will unify the human species and bind it more intimately to the Earth.¹⁶ The binding agent is science itself—or, rather, science in mythic form. Some celebrants of the Epic have created musical and ritual accompaniments to the story, seeking to infuse it with an experiential dimension.

What I am suggesting then, in outlining these projects, their genealogy, and their affinities with Anthropocene discourse, is that these efforts embody and respond to key elements of Chakrabarty's portrait of our Anthropocene moment. They collapse con-

14 See “The Great Story,” accessed 18 June 2015, http://thegreatstory.org/what_is.html.

15 Tucker and Swimme also invoke the language of the Anthropocene. Humans have “crossed over into an Earth whose very atmosphere and biosphere are being shaped by human decisions . . . With our machines and our numbers we have become a geological force.” Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 101–2.

16 Wilson first alluded to an epic of evolution in his *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). For a fuller examination of these movements and their relationship to science, see Lisa Sideris, “Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2015): 136–53.

ventional boundaries between human and natural history,¹⁷ foster self-recognition of humans as a species, and implicate human agency across geological timescales. In their utilization of multiple genres—myth, ritual, film, art, and song—they might even be seen to foster something Chakrabarty considers impossible, namely, a “phenomenology of us as a species,” an emotional or experiential identification with the species concept.¹⁸ Moreover, they claim to combine insights from across the disciplinary spectrum, and even to breathe new life into the humanities.¹⁹ So, we do not have to imagine what it would look like if scholars were to take up the challenges Chakrabarty puts before us. From where I am standing—in religious studies—it seems these projects are well underway. Preliminary results are in. In my view, the results are dispiriting.

A Perilous Journey

While he finds Wilson’s ideas alluring, Chakrabarty is attuned to the perils of inviting a vision of humans as a species, or a “natural condition,” to dominate scholarship across the disciplines. He believes our current situation confronts us with questions of human collectivity, but he resists a homogenizing vision of “global identity,” and sees “obvious value” in retaining “postcolonial suspicion of the universal.”²⁰ He does not abandon one scale of history for another, but asks that we attend to these registers simultaneously (even if doing so radically challenges historical understanding). The specter of “essentialism” is real to him, as are the dangers of “the political uses of biology.”²¹ Still, I am not convinced that Chakrabarty fully appreciates the way in which scaling-up our imagination of the human has engendered—and perhaps is bound to engender—essentialist, reductionist, or homogenizing portraits of the human, not to mention inadequate forms of interdisciplinarity. Wilson’s species concept, in and of itself, carries a lot of troubling baggage.²²

17 It might be said that they collapse cosmic history into *human* history, counterintuitive as that sounds, insofar as humans have been seen as implicitly present since the Big Bang.

18 Chakrabarty, “Four Theses,” 220.

19 See, for example, Mary Evelyn Tucker’s “Overview” of the *Journey of the Universe*, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/>.

20 Chakrabarty, “Four Theses,” 222.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Wilson’s work routinely pursues grand and controversial themes: human nature and sociobiology; free will and determinism; the unity of science. His bold pronouncements on these themes, moreover, tend to be interconnected, as parts of an overarching metaphysics.

Citing Daniel Lord Smail's work on deep history, for example, Chakrabarty suggests that the aforementioned perils are not so grave. Species, after all, are not fixed or homogeneous entities, and the quest to identify human nature has proven largely futile and is, therefore, not something to fret about. Furthermore, Chakrabarty ventures that all disciplines engage in reductionism or abstraction: the category of personhood is "no less a reduction of or an abstraction from the embodied and whole human being, than, say, the human skeleton discussed in anatomy class."²³ Well, perhaps. But we should note that Wilson's brand of species-thinking, unlike Smail's, (or Darwin's) *does* entail that "humans possess a species-specific nature and morality."²⁴ These bold assertions are uncritically received by Epic of Evolution devotees. They, like Wilson, are not especially sensitive to the limits of biological explanation. They will not entertain conversations about human nature not "firmly grounded in the sciences" and believe that "one world calls for one story."²⁵ As they gaze out into the cosmos, or deep into our evolutionary past, the new self-appointed narrators of the Anthropocene do not contemplate a differentiated humanity polarized into rich and poor—as Chakrabarty at least occasionally does—but humanity in a universalizing spirit. Our destiny is to become "universe people . . . a form of human being that is natural to the universe."²⁶

What is worse, Wilson and his admirers castigate humanities scholars for failing to place these settled accounts of human nature at the center of their research, as if humanists' reluctance to do so stemmed from a failure of courage rather than an appreciation of the diverse conceptual tools available to us from across the disciplines. Wilson's attachment to the relative fixity and universality of human nature is inseparable from his investment in a form of faux interdisciplinarity he calls consilience.²⁷ Consilience, the unity of all knowledge, is predicated upon a clear disciplinary hierarchy. Disciplines oriented to the study of human culture will eventually fall out into science, Wilson predicts, as science progressively colonizes and explains material that was once their purview. Hence, the lasting value of the arts and humanities lies in their capacity to express in poetic, visual, or narrative form—and thereby disseminate and celebrate—the discoveries of science.

23 Chakrabarty, "Four Theses," 215.

24 Edward O. Wilson, *In Search of Nature* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996), 99.

25 See Loyal Rue and Ursula Goodenough, "A Consilient Curriculum," in *The Evolutionary Epic: Science's Story and Humanity's Response*, eds. Cheryl Genet et al. (Santa Margarita, CA: Collins Foundation Press, 2009), 181.

26 Swimme and Tucker, *Journey*, 113.

27 Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

Variations on this problematic division of labor characterize the narrative projects that are presently encroaching upon my discipline.²⁸

As scholars pursue convergences among disparate disciplines and timescales, they will find some collaborators more egalitarian than others. Among the inegalitarian partners, as John M. Meyer rightly notes, are enthusiasts of consilience who seek to reconcile disciplinary differences by uniting all under the banner of biology.²⁹ Scientists who exhort humanists to embrace their portrait of the human may fail to recognize that the sciences themselves reveal multiple registers and scales, and thus multiple images of the human. Even within biological science alone—say paleobiology, microbiology, and biochemistry—we find visions of the human that are incommensurable with one another, as Julia Adeney Thomas argues.³⁰ The species-level view of humans as a collective agent and discrete entity might be recognizable to paleobiologists, but a microbiologist would reject this image in favor of one that regards each of us as a conglomerate of multiple species, akin to a coral reef. Where paleobiology may seem to underwrite species solidarity—the ethic at the heart of universalizing narratives like the Epic of Evolution or Universe Story—the microbiologist’s perspective makes it difficult to talk about a human “we” at all. “While 99.9 percent of our human DNA is shared,” Thomas notes, “our microbial cells may have as little as 50 percent of their genetic profile in common.” For those who look to science to inspire or justify a narrative of species oneness “this finding is disturbing.”³¹

Again, no single discipline can define for us what it means to be human in the Age of the Human. Instead of turning away from the messiness and inexactitude of these immiscible scales and their possible meanings—or forcing a reconciliation that does violence to their autonomy and richness—we might look instead “with *wonder* at the incommensurable yet accurate ways in which ‘the human’ emerges in various disciplines, especially in the Anthropocene.”³² Ambitious disciplinary mergers such as those being forged in and around my own field of study will be productive and equitable only when scholars take seriously that *no single framework can adequately interrogate the Anthropocene*. We must say this again and again, and we must mean what we say, and say what we mean.

28 Loyall Rue and Ursula Goodenough, “A Consilient Curriculum,” 181.

29 John M. Meyer, “Less is More,” in “Minding the Gap: Working Across Disciplines in Environmental Studies,” eds. Robert Emmett and Frank Zelko, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 2: 15–18.

30 Julia Adeney Thomas, “History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value,” *American Historical Review* 119, no. 5 (2014): 1587–607.

31 Thomas, “History and Biology,” 1595.

32 *Ibid.*, 1589 (emphasis added).

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