

Review of Byron Williston, *The Anthropocene Project: Virtue in the Age of Climate Change*. Oxford University Press, 2015. 209 pages

Jay Foster

Preview

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By its very title, *The Anthropocene Project* positions itself in juxtaposition with the so-called “Enlightenment Project.” The phrase “the Enlightenment Project” seems to have entered the philosophical lexicon some thirty years after the Manhattan Project via Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981). That book argued that whatever the successes of science and materialism, the moral project of Enlightenment was always doomed to failure. Enlightenment *philosophes* maintained that morality could be given an individual and rational basis, independent of history and tradition, by arguing from principles of human nature to conclusions about moral rules and precepts. MacIntyre famously argued that this line of argument could only sustain moral imperatives and moral emotions, never claims to undebatable moral truths and falsehoods.

A little like MacIntyre, Williston takes calculative approaches to moral problems to be a dead end, at least as far as environmental action is concerned. The rational calculation of individual interests enjoined by orthodox utilitarianism, contractarianism and game theory lead inexorably to collective action problems at the individual and international levels. Williston specifically claims that they all lead to a “tragedy of the commons” (13) *pace*

Garrett Hardin. So long as individual polluters accrue all the economic gains from their actions, it will always be optimal for them to foist their emissions on the collective. So long as “defection” is expected of human nature, there is little incentive to “cooperate” in order to reduce pollution, and so consume, lest you become the sucker who sacrifices something for nothing in exchange. Faced with these kinds of consequentialist calculations, Williston responds that only a well-rounded virtue ethic has the conceptual resources to capture what’s wrong with orthodox environmental ethics. It is perhaps tempting to respond by framing an environmental action in terms of “a duty of mitigation” (72). But Williston holds that duty says, “too little about the failure involved in allowing a morally chaotic world to emerge” (72).

Williston shares some of MacIntyre’s pessimism about the capacity of deontological moral theories to adequately articulate the right and the good. Yet, unlike MacIntyre, Williston does not see the Enlightenment Project as having wholly failed. Instead, he regards it as needing careful supplementation. The Anthropocene Project is intended to extend the Enlightenment Project, not replace it. The specific feature of the Enlightenment that Williston wishes to preserve is its cosmopolitanism, that is, the commitment to “the radical moral equality of all humans” (22). By “all humans,” Williston means all future humans, not just all humans presently alive. The Anthropocene calls us to engage in “a frank assessment of what morality demands of us as members of an intergenerationally spread community of equals” (17). The failure to engage with the demands of morality and act to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental ills is a failure of moral character.

What we lack as moral agents, Williston claims, is a “genuine” appreciation of the virtues of justice, truthfulness and hope (50). In short, we must rediscover our moral bearings by returning to classical Greek and Christian virtues. An appropriate sense of justice will enable us to acknowledge the needs of future generations by overcoming the excesses of greed and “the lure of efficiency” (91). Truthfulness, taken as an intellectual virtue rather than an epistemic marker, gives us ground to reject climate change denial as a weakness of moral character, not just an epistemic shortcoming. The “radical hope of rapid decarbonization” (156) is an instantiation of a Christian virtue. Hope reclaims our moral agency by lifting the moral gaze from present patterns of consumption to a different future which is not yet fully conceived or understood much less realized.

The Anthropocene Project aims at furthering the Enlightenment Project by enriching our moral character with the virtues that will enable us to grapple straightforwardly and candidly with the many environmental issues we now face. Taken in this way, the “we” that makes up the anthropos

in Williston's Anthropocene is a smallish subset of humanity. It is those of us in the industrialized world fully enjoying the benefits of fossil fuels, not those people still living in abject poverty. It isn't clear exactly how the Anthropocene Project extends universally, though this also has been a problem for Enlightenment values. A more tractable question is the extent to which the virtues recommended by Williston can provide the guidance we need. Williston's diagnosis of environmental inaction may be entirely correct; inaction may be a moral failing that stems from deficiencies in our character. But even if we fortify our characters and are ready for action, then it still won't be clear what to do. How do we concretely assess the effects of our actions on future generations? Should coal be used to achieve a reasonable standard of living for its poor? How much fossil fuel is it appropriate for a country to export? Should we use DDT to eradicate malaria carrying mosquitoes? What is the right balance of research investment into fusion, solar power, and batteries? The list of questions could go on. Williston's virtues may bring us to the point of action, but without the cost-benefit analysis, risk assessment, and other tools from the utilitarian tradition, it isn't clear that we could know what to do.

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