Can the Nonhuman Speak?: Breaking the Chain of Being in the Anthropocene

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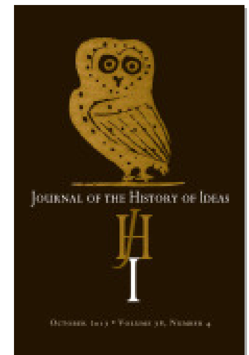

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2016 Arthur O. Lovejoy Lecture
Can the Nonhuman Speak?
Breaking the Chain of Being in the Anthropocene

Joyce E. Chaplin

The answer is easy, the answer comes first: yes, absolutely, the nonhuman can speak. Consider animals. Of course they speak. To be precise, they communicate with each other. And, moreover, they do so to transfer information that matters to them. By these measures, they do speak, and meaningfully, and—more to the point—that makes them comparable to us. That's the simple answer. But the question is not so simple. It challenges a powerful claim of western philosophy that speech is unique to humans, a marker of their intellectual, ethical, political, and spiritual distinctiveness. If we are no longer uniquely endowed with speech, what is left to us? At the very least, the fact that nonhuman animals share the power of communication, plus the likelihood that some of them share our capacity for ideation, forces us toward a more careful consideration of why ideas matter and, therefore, why we might matter. By this "we," I mean not just the scholars whose work addresses the history of ideas, but all us hapless humans. Still, historians of ideas and intellectual historians have a particularly important role here, albeit an ironic one. The "idea" that we may not matter as much as we have thought benefits from the exacting mode of

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analysis that we perform as historians of ideas, even as it questions the point of our doing it.

Nevertheless, here goes. The moment has arrived for scholars to analyze a history of comprehending nature as a set of phenomena or perceived phenomena that may be intrinsically unhuman yet no less important for being so. This is a central problem of the Anthropocene, our ongoing state of emergency, and so I will proceed through four tasks. First, I will describe what the term Anthropocene means and how it has at its core a sense of problematic human alienation from the rest of nature, a historically constructed sense that humans have powers that other parts of nature lack, whether in type, scale, or contribution to history-making. Next, I will show that historians of ideas have been historically reluctant to tackle the problem, with special reference to a founding text in our field, whose author gives his name to the lecture on which my article is based, Arthur Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being*. That foundational text examined a hierarchy of natural and supernatural beings, and although it set humans within a linked chain of those beings, as one among several, and while Lovejoy was critical of that concept, he nonetheless accepted its guiding assumption that humans were superior to other natural beings because they could reason and have ideas. Third, I will suggest that these assumptions are intellectually limiting if not ethically suspect bonds that should now be broken, taking my cue from the liberationist critiques made by postcolonial and feminist theory that attacked the concurrent hierarchical thinking about non-European and female human beings.

Fourth and finally, I will argue that, despite our late arrival to it, historians of ideas are among the academic communities most suited to examine the problem of the Anthropocene. We are uniquely equipped to argue for alternatives to intellectual traditions that denigrate the nonhuman by representing it as inferior. In this final task I will focus on Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, because the nature and existence of that work challenges current central assumptions within the emerging secondary literature on the Anthropocene, which emphasize, somewhat handwringingly, that there are no precedents for our current condition. Burke offers an obvious challenge to that defeatist position. Attention to his idea of the sublime, and to other western philosophical traditions that did not assume a hierarchy of human above nonhuman (often by valorizing thought and speech), could be our signal contribution.

Now, a confession. Even though my criticisms of the history of ideas and in particular the *Journal of the History of Ideas* are meant as exhortations—to encourage my colleagues to lend their excellent wits to

solving an ongoing emergency—this seems to me a lonely task. And so I summon to my aid an assistant, and a powerful one, a veritable secret weapon: the owl of Athena/Minerva, ancient symbol of wisdom, of thought. An image of the owl adorns every printed issue of this journal and it stands guard as well over all of the electronic versions. So there, hiding in plain sight, is a reminder of a countervailing history of thought about active connections between us and nonhuman nature, precisely in the realm of ideas. It is this possible kind of connection that I believe we need to investigate within the field and in the pages of the journal, not just on its cover, because it could be a signature contribution to better thinking in (and about) the Anthropocene. We are at a historical watershed. Our position relative to nonhuman animals, as one of superiority (which has been used to silence and dominate other humans, as well), is an artifact of high-modern confidence, obviously misplaced. Now or never, we must replace our contempt for the nonhuman with appreciation and a sense of obligation.

The question of how we matter in literally material terms, in comparison to the other embodied beings and forces on Earth, is arguably *the* question of our time. What are we in comparison to the rest of the natural world? More specifically, do we have powers that other parts of nature lack, in any significant way? At this point in time, the answer to that question is a highly qualified "maybe." We live at an interesting moment in which nature is assumed to have its own agency, quite independent of us, and is described as if comparable to us. Ruskin is rolling in his grave; the pathetic fallacy is rampant. As if in the return of the repressed, the Earth is angry, wounded, vengeful, indifferent, passive-aggressive—pick whatever sentiment you might find appropriate to explain our dilemma in what is increasingly called the Anthropocene.

This neologism, which dates from the late twentieth century (with nineteenth-century precursors) is a name for the present moment in the Holocene, a geologic period in which humans began to flourish, and in which we now seem to have become equivalent to a geologic force. The impact of our collective efforts as producers and as consumers of material things resembles either the vast planet-shaping patterns of temperature and moisture that gave Earth its physical contours in times past, or else the slow accretive impact of small organisms like bacteria and algae in changing the planet's chemistry. Like those material forces, only on a much more rapid timescale, we have destroyed forests, altered or obliterated waterways,

changed the chemistry of the seas, hunted animals to extinction, and eliminated arable land. We have stripped valuable minerals from the earth. We have introduced a toxic cornucopia into the soil, air, and water, and these anthropogenic poisons now reside in our own bodies, as well as those of nearly all other animals. Above all, we are altering the climate, and our alterations have already generated a troubling array of long-term and short-term changes in the weather. These changed patterns of climate threaten life in low-lying ocean regions that will be flooded by rising sea levels, in arctic regions that will disastrously thaw, and in temperate zones that used to produce food for humans but may not be so generous in the future.[1]

The term Anthropocene itself has implications that simultaneously promote and diminish humankind. I claim no originality here—this statement has been multiply proclaimed as a way to describe how we have become equivalent to a geologic force, maybe the fastest-moving such force in the history of the Earth. Our collective acts constitute a Great Acceleration in the pace at which consequential material changes are occurring on the planet. Hurrah for us? Not really. The net result has been a vast reminder that we are just another species, meaning that we are dependent on natural resources for our flourishing and are vulnerable when those resources become scarce. Even in a battered or mutant form, Earth could survive without us, whereas the reverse is not true. The effect is uneasily paradoxical: we loom over nature, out of proportion, and yet we are ultimately reduced in physical significance, not to mention moral stature.

In response, academics, writers, and a variety of public intellectuals are articulating forms of critical analysis to question cultural narratives that propose the human species' superiority over or separation from nature, which often amount to the same thing. Many of these new alternatives currently go under the name of the new materialism, sometimes given in the plural, new materialisms. I quote one proponent, William E. Connolly, by way of summarizing a wide and complex set of intellectual developments:

> The "new materialism" is the most common name given to a series of movements in several fields that criticise anthropocentrism, rethink subjectivity by playing up the role of inhuman forces within the human, emphasize the self-organizing powers of several nonhuman processes, explore dissonant relations between those

[1] Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A* (2011): 369, 842–67.

> processes and cultural practice, rethink the sources of ethics, and commend the need to fold a planetary dimension more actively and regularly into studies of global, interstate and state politics.

The result has been a blossoming of historical topics that lay siege to any dividing line between humans and other material entities: the affective lives of robots and cyborgs, the biographies of places, the implied agencies of global commodities (and physical things in general), the quasi-consciousness of landscapes, the subrational networks of humans and others that construct cultures in ways indescribable as volitional human effort, and the like.[2]

Another label, ecological or environmental humanities, groups together several ways of assessing the human position within and intervention into the natural world, using methods of humanist investigation (historical, philosophical, cultural) into topics that may have been too hastily consigned to the natural and physical scientists.[3] Finally, scholars who do animal studies likewise refer to the work of natural scientists, though using modes of inquiry drawn from the humanities. They have established that, across historical time and cultural space, the range of human interactions with and beliefs about animals have provided alternatives to the dominant, modern, western default position of an assumed superiority over nonhuman creatures. The idea that we are distinctive (not least in creating natural science to scrutinize other animals in ways they do not examine us) and our tendency to use nature instrumentally are, accordingly, not the only options. Rather, nonhuman animals can be credibly described as having intellectual and even (in some cases) cultural lives comparable to ours.[4]

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[2] William E. Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41 (2013): 399. For early contributions (under different names), see Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[3] The best introduction and overview is the journal *Environmental Humanities* (2012–).

[4] Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Angela N. H. Creager and William Chester Jordan, eds., *The Animal/Human Boundary: Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

In some ways, it might seem that historians of ideas would be the perfect intellectual community to make a contribution to the new materialism, even by way of critiquing it, and therefore to examine our dilemma: what it means for us to be humans, entities with ideas, living within a world of other material entities and forces that (we now learn) we cannot entirely command and which operate in disregard of many of our ideas anyway. Yet relevant contributions have so far been rather tentative. Only in 2016, in the spring issue of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, did we see the first relevant contribution, Deborah Coen's essay on the Anthropocene, more specifically on the questions of scale that this new historical periodization seems to propose to historians of ideas. In pointing this out, I do not intend to suggest that the journal and the academic communities it represents are in some way lagging behind. I think a similarly slow response to the Anthropocene concept (and the new materialisms) would be detectable in many journals, depending on their proximity to or remoteness from questions about environmental studies more generally.[5]

But if we were to use the *Journal of the History of Ideas* as a litmus test of how even a broadly defined coalition of scholars invested in intellectual history or the history of ideas have kept the new materialism and environmental humanities at arm's length, there is indeed something unusual about it. Nature has entered the journal in only very specific ways. The nonhuman has barely spoken within its pages.

The journal's overall anthropocentric effect accurately reflects how multiple dominant traditions within western thought have differentiated humans from the rest of material things and placed them above all others in what was once called the Creation, just as God had placed Eve and Adam in a position of dominion or stewardship over all else he had created. Several intellectual genealogies have embellished this differentiation, whether in the terms that might have made the most sense to pagans of the classical world, to the Jews and Christians who had their own histories alongside and then after pagan antiquity, or else to the secular denizens of the global west whose intellectual frameworks likewise designate them as distinctive.

Here the journal restates Arthur O. Lovejoy's signature contribution in this regard, his monograph on *The Great Chain of Being*, delivered as the William James Lectures at Harvard University in 1933 and published in 1936. This is a foundational work in the history of ideas, whether historians of thought follow its specific methodologies or (more likely today) criticize them. Either way, the text is distinctly revealing of the subject matter

[5] Deborah Coen, "Big Is a Thing of the Past: Climate Change and Methodology in the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77 (2016): 305–21.

that initially grounded the field. In taking the great chain of being as his subject, Lovejoy formulated an analysis of how people in the west, for centuries, used a concept of human difference from other earthly beings to explain humanity's place in the world. The book announced not only a new field of academic inquiry, the systematic interrogation of human ideas, but also an assumption that humans differed from, and were likely superior to, the nonhuman beings who shared life on Earth with them, precisely because they alone had ideas.[6]

I will go through Lovejoy's argument in some detail here, to make clear that this was indeed his stated objective and not just an incidental or unintended outcome. He begins his book with the claim that "man, for better or worse, is by nature, and by the most distinctive impulse of his nature, a reflective and interpretative animal," a creature who always seeks "the record of the reaction of his intellect upon the brute facts of his sensible existence." The history of ideas is therefore "the natural history of man," and as such it is as fit a topic for study as "the natural history of the *paramecium* or the white rat." Lovejoy then introduces a specific focus for the history of ideas, his definition of a "unit-idea" that can be traced genealogically over time and through the efforts of multiple authors, as exemplified in texts that are either formal commentaries on the unit-idea (as, for example, with works in religion or philosophy) or else are cultural productions that more elliptically comment upon it (as in works of literature or other art). Thus far into his work, still laying out its introduction, Lovejoy established his intention to define premises and methods that would be essential for any historian of ideas.[7]

His own focus for the rest of the book, and therefore the first unit-idea in the history of the history of ideas, was the great chain of being. Lovejoy examined that idea to establish three points about the history of western ideas. First, authors who defined the chain assumed what Lovejoy called an otherworldliness, a fundamental idealism, an emphasis on a world superior to the sublunary matter in which embodied humans lived and died. Second, the chain of being was in essence a principle of plentitude, a way in which all of the world was filled, existing with all entities that could exist. Third, the chain of being was also a principle of continuity, in which all of the plentiful beings that existed shaded minutely into each other, both categorically distinct from each other yet somehow connecting, each to each, their

[6] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), v.
[7] Ibid., 22–23.

material qualities. Overall, the implied world view was one of inequality. Material beings succeeded each other as the chain went up and up; above them all there was God, immaterial, disembodied Creator of all and governor of the enspirited world of soul and thought that was only rarely glimpsed by humans, unique hybrids of spirit and matter.

Lovejoy's analysis is of course more nuanced than that. He was astute enough to see that, long before Darwin, the chain of being had implied that humans existed among all other material entities. His chapters on the chain in eighteenth-century debates, especially, emphasize the use of the concept to render humanity humble. Man existed in close categorical proximity to other animals; he and those creatures were similar to each other in their shared inferiority to the disembodied beings that more closely resembled the immaterial state of God. Those principles could generate not only appreciation of humanity's humility-inducing place among the sublunary, but also of a non-anthropocentric state of being. If humans were, like animals and even plants, embodied and unable fully to participate in a supernatural state, then it could not be entirely true that the cosmos was centered around the human condition, because the reasons for the cosmos were beyond human ken. Lovejoy cites Descartes on this point: "It is not at all probable that all things have been created for us in such a manner that God has no other end in creating them." There was an ethical point to this humbling of humanity; this was different, however, from the more radical arguments that would propose similarity and equality among all animals, human or not, that began in the eighteenth century and took on new power after Darwin.[8]

At the end of the book, nonetheless, Lovejoy returns to his main point that it is human ability to reason about the world that makes humanity distinctive, even when human ideas do not achieve the status of truth, as Lovejoy thought had been true of the chain of being. "The principles of plentitude and continuity . . . usually rested at bottom upon a faith, implicit or explicit, that the universe is a rational order." Metaphysically, Lovejoy did not believe this to have been more than faith. He concluded that his analysis had shown "the hypothesis of the absolute rationality of the cosmos to be unbelievable." He thought that the principles of plenitude and continuity, put together, strained belief because they generated an infinity of possibilities over which no system could provide order. The chain of being was ultimately a failed hypothesis of an orderly Creation. But "the utility of a belief and its validity are independent variables," he said, in the

[8] Ibid., 188.

final paragraph of the book. That phrase left unchallenged the overall validity of a belief that the history of ideas was the equivalent of a natural history of humanity.[9]

Indeed, Lovejoy had contradicted himself, or at the very least left in place a remarkable ambiguity. In the opening to his book, he had stated the facticity of reasoned human ideas as incidents comparable to those of natural science. But by the end of the book, he confessed his belief that nature, the universe, resisted any rational ordering, at least as judged according to a premodern chain of being or else, presumably, any other principle of logical or empirical integration. Between these two statements, the book makes ideas natural to human beings without making a case for what that capacity would be good for, except maybe contemplating ourselves. We return to an anthropocentric view of existence, at least within this prominent unit-idea in the western tradition, a longstanding cultural emphasis that is the source of a great deal of complaint about western humanity's domineering views of the natural world.[10]

And yet it must be said that, if anything, Lovejoy was unusual in his deep and multiple attempts to address questions in science and in the epistemology of the natural world more generally. His and anthropologist George Boas's 1935 analysis of nature as a norm for human understanding, in *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, is distinctive for that reason. So were Lovejoy's two crisp communications to the major journal *Science* (of 1911 and 1912), correcting one scientist's imprecise use of the term "vitalism," even as Lovejoy maintained the possible integrity of the concept as a human hypothesis about the material world. The same is true of his 1948 essay on "Nature as Aesthetic Norm." Still, these pieces resemble each other, and Lovejoy's more famous monograph, because all of them assume that the human perspective on nature—whether scientific or aesthetic—is one in which humans demonstrate their cognitive capacity to explain what they perceive in the material world beyond them: nature, not in and for itself, but as it organized human perceptions of beauty or other integrated forms of meaning.[11]

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[9] Ibid., 327, 329, 331, 333.

[10] The classic articulations of this are Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967, 1203–7; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

[11] Lovejoy, "The Import of Vitalism," *Science*, July 21, 1911, 610–14; Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Driesch and the Meaning of Vitalism," *Science*, November 15, 1912, 672–75; Lovejoy, "Nature as Aesthetic Norm," in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948), 69–77; Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and*

But I think the crucial reason for intellectual history's largely anthropocentric stance toward nonhuman nature is more specific than Lovejoy's particular position might suggest. It does not only draw upon a long-term set of assumptions within the cultures of the global west. That may be necessary but not sufficient to the field's prevailing indifference to questions about the human place within nature, compared to other academic fields of inquiry. More important is the fact that the history of ideas is a high-modern field. It achieved its shape in the twentieth century during a historically unprecedented differentiation between humans and the rest of nature, a transformation that exuded a distinctive confidence that people could shape their material circumstances at will. High modernism has been associated with projects to use science and technology to transform the natural world and to conquer material want, to reorder the world and much of human experience within it. Whatever its precedents and lingering influences, high modernism was particularly powerful around the middle third of the twentieth century, and this happens to be when the history of ideas took on most of its current academic form.[12]

True, the field has origins earlier in the twentieth century, as with Lovejoy's early work. But the major interpretations and arguments of the field came after mid-century. The main figures around whom schools of analysis have formed, the figures who introduced specific terms for the analysis of language, text, and context—let me throw out the names, for instance, of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Quentin Skinner, and John Pocock—may have divergently developed the early twentieth-century lines of inquiry that founded the field. But these main figures are mostly dedicated to the proposition that humans exist apart from the rest of natural world, that they can be analyzed in terms of the artificial—that is, the political, in the Aristotelian sense of man as naturally political animal, endowed with a sociable and verbal intelligence absent in other animals. This emphasis is particularly apparent in Skinner's recent "rhetorical turn"; his stress on early modern traditions of rhetoric valorizes human speech and writing, examined in isolation from humans' other natures and from the natures of nonhuman others.[13]

Related Ideas in Antiquity, with supplementary essays by W. F. Albright and P. E. Dumont (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935).

[12] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[13] Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). But see Jacques Derrida and David Wills, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002): 369–418; Annabel

Some partial exceptions exist. Foucault is perhaps most obviously different in terms of his engagement, however uneven, with questions about the human place within nature, as with his extremely influential analyses of the human body and of biopolitics. And Martin Heidegger's analysis of technology also represents a variation from the usual pattern, though his contributions in this regard have probably had a narrower impact than Foucault's. Above all, there are the members of the Frankfurt School, whose criticisms of capitalism and consumerism emitted a green impulse, sometimes quite vividly. But for the most part, the proverbial extraterrestrial observer who might somehow read the main works of western intellectual history on Earth would not think their authors were interested in the fullest range of possible ideas about the human place within the natural world.[14]

High modernism unites ways of investigating ideas that might otherwise be different from one another. Lovejoy's initial definition of the history of ideas, as a kind of genealogy of thought units, is not the same as the contextualized and more historically contingent methods of intellectual history. But both forms of inquiry have assumed that their subjects are human beings primarily if not solely. Either strategy would maintain a sense that the best or maybe even only way to compare human and nonhuman would be according to criteria that remain unstudiedly anthropocentric.

This is a large claim that requires at least some evidence. To that end, I have identified all of the relevant articles referring to nature that have appeared in the *JHI* in the past ten years, plus a set of small essays from a special issue, and they fit into this pattern. I emphasize the last ten years because they roughly map onto the escalating calls for new materialist studies and wider circulation of the term "Anthropocene." They are (in addition to Deborah Coen's recent piece): Tiffany Tsao, "Environmentalism and Civilizational Development in the Colonial British Histories of the Indian Archipelago (1783–1820)" (2013); Robin Douglass, "Rousseau's Debt to Burlamaqui: The Ideal of Nature and the Nature of Things" (2011); Charles W. J. Withers, "Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and in

S. Brett, *Changes of State: Nature and the Limits of the City in Early Modern Natural Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), notable exceptions.

[14] Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Don Ihde, *Heidegger's Technologies: Postphenomenological Perspectives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad, eds., *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011); Andrew Biro, ed., *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

History" (2009); Aris Sarafianos, "The Contractility of Burke's Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art" (2008); and the forum in volume 69 (2008) on Francis Bacon, gender, and nature. The essays by Tsao, Douglass, Withers, and Sarafianos are all important examinations of ideas about nature that nevertheless keep humans at center stage. They use the nonhuman as context or measure of humanity. The pieces in the forum on Bacon debate the extent to which Bacon's theorization of nature in fact represented theories of male dominance. Ultimately, the scholars' focus is on justice among humans, domineering men versus subordinated women, rather than on human domination of or violence toward other parts of the natural world.[15]

Of course, nature makes an appearance within the journal in many other instances. But it tends to be defined in similarly anthropocentric ways: ideas of *human* nature have been interrogated; nonhuman nature has been positioned as a topic of rational investigation (as in the history of science); and "nature" functions as a categorical component within the history of metaphysics. Alternatives have received much less attention. As far as I can tell, the journal has never reviewed any of the utilitarian work on animal liberation by or about philosopher Peter Singer, for example, one of the most innovative ideas in the past generation.[16]

Moreover, the *JHI* has not done much to pursue the question that prompted mine. That was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), a theoretically engaged query about western scholarship on socially subordinate or culturally marginal individuals who had left few, if any, written records about themselves, and whose lives were examined, accordingly, as if they were objects of anthropological analysis, not generators of analyzable statements. Spivak assumed that her contextually speechless subjects did in fact think, but that their thoughts remained elusive. She defined this as a problem of sources—lack of the written evidence

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[15] Tiffany Tsao, "Environmentalism and Civilizational Development in the Colonial British Histories of the Indian Archipelago (1783–1820)," *JHI* 74 (2013): 449–71; Robin Douglass, "Rousseau's Debt to Burlamaqui: The Ideal of Nature and the Nature of Things," *JHI* 72 (2011): 209–30; Charles W. J. Withers, "Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and in History," *JHI* 70 (2009): 637–58; Aris Sarafianos, "The Contractility of Burke's Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art," *JHI* 69 (2008): 23–48; forum on Francis Bacon, *JHI* 69 (2008), including Brian Vickers, "Francis Bacon, Feminist Historiography and the Dominion of Nature," 117–41; Katharine Park, "Response to Brian Vickers," 143–46; Carolyn Merchant, "Secrets of Nature: The Bacon Debates Revisited," 147–62.

[16] Combined searches for "Singer" and "animal" in JSTOR and Project MUSE databases for the *JHI*.

that historians and scholars of literature have taken as their foundational archive. And she saw as deeply troubling the ethnographic analysis that was the proposed solution, the assessment of wordless people by cultural outsiders who were, at best, intermittently sympathetic. Citing Marxist critique of western domination, she categorized women and nonwestern "subalterns" as similar to individuals dispossessed by the logic of class privilege, yet as different from these subjects because even less able to articulate their own position in a world subject to European colonization. Spivak's analysis proposed a suite of questions that scholars of ideas might have found compelling. And yet there was small attention to them in the *JHI*. To date, only eight articles have addressed her work in any way. It is perhaps unsurprising that criticism of a purely textual foundation for historical inquiry was challenging for scholars interested in the history of ideas. But for those who incline toward this journal, a disinclination even to argue against Spivak, a decision to ignore her, is nonetheless striking.[17]

By modeling my question on Spivak's, I transmit her warning that silence (real or perceived) never implies the absence of obligation, either to other humans or to nonhumans. My query is not identical to hers, by any means. Even more than Spivak's, mine challenges two central assumptions within the history of ideas: first, that humans are worthy of specialized study because they have a distinctive if not unique ability to formulate and analyze ideas; second, that this ability not only separates them from the rest of the world but signifies their superiority over it. But the separation or superiority could only prevail if intellectual historians were to ignore alternate traditions of thought that did not make these assumptions. By pointing this out, I do not intend my question to detract from Spivak's emphasis on justice among humans. Too often, a focus on the nonhuman is wrongly perceived as doing that. But concern over the state of nature is coterminous with concerns about justice, as a variety of scholars, including postcolonial theorists (among them Spivak herself) are pointing out. Environmentalism is now being substantially defined as a human rights issue, in terms of the thwarted ability of all global populations to defend access to resources and fight global warming. For this reason, questions about who or what are allowed to speak share a goal, because two forms of silencing—of subaltern humans and of nonhumans—have, over time, multiplied injustice, both to humans and to nonhumans.[18]

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[17] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313; combined searches for "Chakravorty" and "Spivak" in JSTOR and Project MUSE databases for the *JHI*.

[18] Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72–73;

How can historians of ideas challenge this? They could easily address topics that have been defined elsewhere as the subjects of environmental humanities and the new materialisms. They might in that way build on what other fields of inquiry have been pursuing. Most obviously, the journal of the American Society for Environmental History, *Environmental History*, has pursued pertinent topics, though mostly as items of social or political history, more rarely as cultural history—very rarely in the way that historians of ideas would approach them. If the *Journal of the History of Ideas* has been ceding authority in this particular regard, it would probably be to *Isis*, but also to *History and Theory* and to *Critical Inquiry*. That last journal frequently makes contributions to the histories of science and the environment, most notably with Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses," which appeared in 2009.

Chakrabarty's essay has to a very great extent conditioned many other academic investigations of our current dilemma in that it, and they, fall short of questioning humanity's unique status as meaning-givers. The point of "The Climate of History," as indeed of Deborah Coen's recent essay in the *JHI*—and of a plethora of other such pieces—is to ponder how humans might somehow eventually comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible Anthropocene. The subject is typically presented as a problem of scale, of the immensity of the human transformation of an entire planet and of their Great Acceleration of otherwise glacial geologic time. The element of scale is assumed to be unprecedented, therefore hard for humanity to confront. Despite that, there is a hope that sustained mental effort will reduce the problem to comprehensibility—enough pondering will break the dilemma into understandable units of analysis, and then we will be in the reassuring pursuit of a solution.[19]

These assumptions are not, however, accurate for the whole span of human history. Rather, they continue to reflect the high-modern assumptions that human control of the natural world should be the default; comprehension is supposed to yield a manageable and predictable future. But it is not the case that thinking about the enormity of the natural world, pondering its alterity and complexity, and confronting its resistance to our

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Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 1–18; Ian Baucom, "The Human Shore: Postcolonial Studies in the Age of Natural Science," *History of the Present* 2 (2012): 1–23.

[19] Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197–222; Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsburg, 2010), 169–215; Coen, "Big Is a Thing of the Past."

efforts to control it are anything new. Each of those dilemmas had been thought about before the modern period. They are not unprecedented, but their precedents are at this point sufficiently remote so as to be invisible to scholars who have focused on modern history. Because many of the scholars who initially addressed the historical dimensions of the Anthropocene had taken as their focus modernity (if not late modernity), the first layer of response to the topic has not been entirely helpful in situating it within the fullest understanding of the human past.[20]

This fuller understanding is overdue for our investigation, and in particular the element Lovejoy slighted: ideas of nature as something bracingly resistant to human comprehension. This is a specific stance in relation to the natural world that recognizes its otherness without thus denigrating it—nature is beyond humans, yet unignorable by them, and so relevant to their ethical status. This topic may seem to be furthest from the usual remit of scholars of ideas, for all the reasons I have already recited. And yet it is the one we should address if we are to do more than simply play catchup with the fields that have been more fully engaged with the new materialism, environmental humanities, and animal studies.

That nonhuman animals may have ideas which humans cannot understand presents a fundamental challenge to the great chain of being, both the idea thereof and Lovejoy's method, and serves significantly to orient our efforts, as humanists generally and historians of ideas specifically, in relation to two other communities.

First, as *similar* to the scientists who investigate animal cognition, who are striving to conceptualize nonhuman thought without concluding that it is like human thought; and second, as *distinct* from the popular writers who sentimentally represent animals as versions of us—melodious whales, brave rescue dogs, gregarious rats, ethical elephants. The former position has intellectual credibility whereas the latter does not, whatever strategic work it performs for environmental activism. We do not know whether animals are like us, and may never know, and it should not matter. Animals may think (and therefore speak) in ways we may never comprehend, but this does not mean we should not respect them, or any other nonhuman parts of nature. In a sense, this logic builds upon the intervention that Spivak, and others, have made to warn us that when the subaltern at last is heard, she will not necessarily agree with her interpreters. Former

[20] Joyce E. Chaplin, *Round about the Earth: Circumnavigation from Magellan to Orbit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012); Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann Margaret McGrath, Kristin Mann, "How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History," *American Historical Review* 118 (2013): 1431–72.

slaves were not grateful to white abolitionists in the terms that had been expected—"thank you" was not their preferred first public utterance. And yet these were fellow humans, who had exactly the same capacity for thought and speech as those who had spoken for them. Once granted a voice, they used that ability to assert their autonomy.[21]

If our fellow humans have, quite rightfully, resented being spoken for, being patronized while kept in a state of suppressed thought and speech, it is unlikely that anything nonhuman would ever endorse our sentiments on their behalf, however well meaning. Certainly, Peter Singer would not expect animals saved from slaughterhouses or laboratories to endorse his theory of why they should have been liberated—he generated that utilitarian concept based on human ideas of justice, quite apart from whatever animals believe. Still less should anyone assume that other parts of nature cogitate in a manner comparable to us. Our thinking on their behalf is presumptuous. It only has credibility as a thought-experiment to test our categorically human ethical traditions, especially those that have functioned to generate respect for that which stands outside humanity, to remind us what might be at stake in being human within an otherwise nonhuman world.

The idea that nature has a dual condition, as inhuman and as nevertheless invaluable to humans for that very reason, is famously articulated by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757. For all that it is well known, it has received little attention from historians of ideas; art historians and philosophers of aesthetics have much more readily turned to it. To date, there is only one book-length scholarly analysis of Burke's sublime, a set of essays published (in English) in 2012. Burke's successor in parsing the sublime, Immanuel Kant, has in contrast received much greater attention, and in multiple languages. Above all, integration of Burke's sublime into theories about the natural world has tended, as in the 2012 essay collection, to ignore Burke's emphasis on the radical alterity of nonhuman nature.[22]

To be sure, concepts of the sublime existed before Burke; they derive from ancient prototypes. But previous authors had failed to make the dramatic point he did about the odd appeal of that which humans can neither control nor comprehend. He arrived at that conclusion as early as 1745, in

[21] Ritvo, "History and Animal Studies," *Society & Animals* 10 (2002): 403–6.
[22] Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard, eds., *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

a letter to his friend Richard Shackleton, describing a torrential flooding of the River Liffey in Dublin:

> It gives me pleasure to see nature in those great, though terrible scenes. It fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon herself. This, together with the sedentary life I lead, forced some reflections on me which, perhaps, otherwise would not have occurred. I considered how little man is, yet, in his own mind, how great! He is lord and master of all things, yet scarce can command anything. He is given a freedom of his will; but wherefore? Was it but to torment and perplex him the more? How little avails this freedom, if the objects he is to act upon be not as much disposed to obey as he to command! What well-laid, and what better-executed scheme of his is there, but what a small change of nature is sufficient to defeat and entirely abolish? If but one element happens to encroach a little on the other, what confusion may it not create in his affairs ! what havoc ! what destruction ! The servant destined to his use confines, menaces, and frequently destroys this mighty, this feeble lord.

Here in brief were the main components of the Burkean sublime, not yet under that name, but recognizable already: the paradoxical allure of something beyond human control, whose impact could not be rationally defined. Indeed, the very word "ideas" in Burke's eventual published title is misleading. His work is not really about how we might have ideas relevant to the sublime. Rather, we have sensations or perceptions about it that register initially in the body, not in the mind, and are more accurately classified as "passions," which Burke considers as "laws of nature." He opens his work with a division of human experience as typified either by pleasure or pain, the standard libertine measures of the sources of ethical behavior, which avoid grounding the good life on the presumptive possession of souls and intellects. Instead, humans are supposed fundamentally to be sensory bodies. If they have rational capacity, it is irrelevant to Burke's analysis.[23]

This is not an idealist position and is therefore at odds with the Lovejovian view. Burke appears nowhere in *The Great Chain of Being*, even though Lovejoy's chronology includes the era when Burke's work appeared

[23] Edmund Burke to Richard Shackleton, 25 January 1745, *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, ed. R. V. McNamee and H. J. Laski, http://www.e-enlightenment.com; Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757), vii, 3, 13.

and was read. Nor is Burke's argument rationalist, given his protests that reason did not always order sensation. "Pain and pleasure are simple ideas," he declares, "incapable of definition." They are the most basic of passions, and the most powerful, because they are intrinsically linked to self-preservation. It is for that reason that they characterize the sublime: "the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation." Fear of pain and death make something sublime, because that thing is simultaneously frightening and yet compelling, exerting an aesthetic force that works upon humanity. Whereas merely beautiful things seem manageable—they are small, smooth, soft, pretty, appealing—sublime things are tremendous and visceral threats to any anthropocentric view of the world. Anything that can be understood clearly cannot be sublime. A "croud of great and confused images" is incomprehensible, even while it is clearly sublime and imparts a sense of greatness accordingly. And yet any mental effort to order the crowded images will spoil the effect; "separate them, and you lose much of the greatness, and join them, and you infallibly lose the clearness." In perhaps the strongest divergence from a rationalist interpretation, Burke rejects that humans have minds that could order the chain of being. "That great chain of causes, which linking one to another even to the throne of God himself, can never be unravelled by any industry of ours."[24]

Things seem sublime because they provoke sensations of privation, desolation, suddenness, irregular succession, or obscurity. Any apprehension of what is sublime is therefore too confused and unpredictable to elicit clear thought of any kind, including moral thought. Burke extends that sense of a pervasive uncertainty even to the human apprehension of words, the speech that should, but does not, provide cognitive differentiation from mere matter. We speak, we write, but our words do not necessarily convey clarity. When we describe material things, our verbal descriptions abstract them, making them ambiguous. Words invoke clear sensations, as if by sounds or pictures, but not rational ideas. Burke's concluding evidence is from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which the poet evokes hell through repetition, a repeating list of short words for particularly malign elements of a particularly fallen world and with an echoing phrase in conclusion:

> Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death,
> A universe of Death.

Hell is a place that no reader, by definition, would have seen—at least not yet. But its horrors are suggested by words, not because they are accurate,

[24] Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 3, 49, 72, 119.

but precisely because they are not. Our sensory experiences of earthly rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, and dens have already conjured up a universe of death, and the words for these evoke our memory of those experiences.[25]

What I want to emphasize about Burke's *Enquiry* is that it diversifies the history of thought about nature and, by so doing, questions many reigning ideas about the Anthropocene. First and most basically, Burke is an example of western thinking (modern but not high modern) that questioned a meaningful separation between humans and the natural world, let alone a confidence that humans can control the nonhuman as their natural subordinate. He claims instead that "society" is something that humans could have not only with each other but "with other animals, and which we may in some sort be said to have even with the inanimate world"—an astonishing claim, then or now. Burke compares human fear of pain to what dogs feel, rendering equivalent human and animal passions. And he argues that human language is not necessarily more effective than animal vocalization. "The natural cries of all animals, even of those annimals [*sic*] with whom we have not been acquainted, never fail to make themselves sufficiently understood; this cannot be said of [human] language."[26]

Next, Burke proposes a confrontation with precisely the immense scales that have been thought to be novel in the Anthropocene. "Vastness," "infinity," and "eternity" are all powerful causes of the Burkean sublime. Visions of large extent, sensations of endless continuation—both encourage fear and yet attraction. "Infinity has a tendency," he says, "to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime." To be sublime is to be indifferent to human existence, to exist beyond any human sensory or emotional capacity, in terms of the sentiments or passions as they were defined in Burke's era. It was a novel and arresting idea in 1757, so much so that Burke modified his conclusions in the second edition of his *Enquiry*, published in 1759. In that amended version, he blurred the boundaries between the horrifying pull of the sublime and the sweet appeal of the beautiful, presenting human nature as not quite so awestruck at the inhuman nature of the rest of nature, as longing (conversely) for the familiar and manageable. Still, definitions of the sublime remained profoundly Burkean from 1757 onward, whatever the author's later modifications.[27]

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[25] Ibid., 183.

[26] Ibid., 14, 69, 122.

[27] Ibid., 48, 51–52, 52–53 (quotation on p. 52); David Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 89–96.

Quite obviously, Burke presents the natural world as a source of energizing bafflement for human beings. His most recent intellectual biographer, David Bromwich, has argued that "a deeper preoccupation throughout the *Enquiry* appears to be the human imagining of catastrophe—the mind's fascination with all that overbears its capacity and makes it lose control of understanding." In those terms, the Burkean sublime is relevant not only generally, to the history of environmental thought, but particularly, to what might concern us most about the Anthropocene: incipient catastrophe. The tiger, the great white shark, the avalanche, the abyss—awe at their power to bring pain and death has been widened and deepened with escalating fear about catastrophic climate events. I am aware that there is one notable difference between the Burkean sublime and the contemporary Anthropocene, which is that human action has itself become catastrophic. I grant those who define the Anthropocene as a historic rupture in human thought that point of novelty. But I will also immediately counter that Burke's implantation of a perverse human desire for the cosmically deadly had in a sense anticipated if not predicted the fact of our generating it ourselves, and the fact of our fascination with that outcome for ourselves, and therefore for others, whether human or not.[28]

Reading Burke into debates about the Anthropocene would have to make that new era, in which we seem now to live, less unprecedented, less of a surprise, and therefore more of an obvious responsibility. We have confronted its possibilities before; we can claim no innocence as an excuse for delayed action. More careful work on Burke's impact, on the circulation of his and others' ideas about the sublime, would, I argue, give historians of thought a distinctive voice in the emerging and necessary field of environmental humanities, which uses the word "sublime" in relation to the Anthropocene, but without reference to Burke, and therefore without establishing an extended and useful set of mental possibilities. So too is there a greater need to examine still other intellectual traditions that do not assume human separation from the natural world, ranging from St. Francis/Pope Francis, through skeptical traditions (including Montaigne's), to the Frankfurt School, and then on to the philosophical components of the new materialisms, which have not, so far, undergone much analysis by historians of any kind.[29]

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[28] Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 89.

[29] See, for instance, Byron Williston, "The Sublime Anthropocene," *Environmental Philosophy* 13 (2016): 155–74, which focuses on Kant.

In the preface to his *Philosophy of Right* (1820), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote, "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk." This was an interpretation of history as well as of philosophy, because Hegel seems to have meant that philosophy can only interpret what has already happened, not prescribe what should happen—wisdom exists only after the fact. I would like to pick a fight with Hegel, here at the end. He assumed he knew owls and that his knowledge of them would bring them into the realm of the human. If they were wise, he thought, their wisdom must be appropriate to human philosophy. If they could navigate in the dark, he assumed, their seeing must be a negative version of our blindness. But owls are not human. We don't know what they know, or at least not yet; we don't know what they see, what they think, what they might say to us if they were so inclined. And we cannot wait to find out exactly how they might speak—we must act now to save their material conditions of being. It is precisely because we are in the dark about owls that we must keep them in mind, along with all else that is nonhuman on this Earth. If the concept of the Anthropocene is at all useful, it is by firmly confirming that we are just another species. And so we are indeed achieving wisdom, if only as the dusk is falling fast.[30]

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[30] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1820), trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 13.