RECONSTRUCTING ENVIRONMENTAL PRAGMATISM: MELIORIST PERSPECTIVES FOR A DAMAGED WORLD

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ABSTRACT*:* The paper advocates a reconstruction of environmental pragmatism in the light of the Anthropocene. Understood as a crisis of a way of life, it demands to be addressed at a deep, systemic level. Whereas environmental pragmatism so far has focused mainly on effective problem-solving that feeds into problematic ideas of progress and human mastery over nature, I suggest to draw on a more comprehensive idea of meliorism. A critical alignment to meliorist thinking leads to two major conceptual shifts which emancipate environmental pragmatism from its rather narrow focus and provide the means to re-fashion it into a more adequate approach of dealing with the Anthropocene. Furthermore, I propose to understand this alternative version of environmental pragmatism as a transformative project and a practice of cultural criticism which aims at disrupting common sense beliefs as well as harmful everyday practices.

Keywords*:* environmental crisis, Anthropocene, environmental pragmatism, meliorism, critique

1. Is There a Need for a New Environmental Pragmatism?

The pragmatist project is committed to addressing real-world problems. Against the idea of dealing with philosophical "paper doubts", as Charles S. Peirce called it, pragmatism engages with problematic situations rooted in concrete experiences. Its objectives, thus, result from careful diagnostics of the present. Pragmatist inquiry could be said to start with one simple question: What is wrong? The answer to this question, however, is far from simple. In addition, it is probably not even equivocally. Following the fundamental pluralism essential for pragmatism, one may expect diverse, perhaps even contradictory descriptions of a situation as well as a wide range of possible ways of handling it. Both ideas, the task of dealing with actual problems and the acknowledgement of a plurality of solutions, are central to the self-understanding of environmental pragmatism.

Emerging in the 1990ies, environmental pragmatism faced an increasingly aggravating ecological situation on the one hand. It became more and more manifest that there is something terribly wrong with the way humans interact with nature. On the other hand, there seemed to be also something wrong with a discipline dedicated to providing insights into human-nature-interaction and suggesting better alternatives: environmental philosophy. Even though the debates in this field may be "interesting, provocative and complex, [they] seem to have no real impact on the deliberations of environmental scientists, activists and policy-makers" (Light / Katz 1996, 1), as Andrew Light and Eric Katz write in their introduction to the first edited volume on environmental pragmatism. In a nutshell, their criticism echoes the traditional pragmatist objection against an all too theoretical, dogmatic, detached "armchair philosophy" that inevitably remains ineffective with regard to practical affairs. What William James famously called "vicious intellectualism" and presented as the cause for the practical irrelevance of large parts of philosophy and theology for daily life around the turn to the twentieth century, still haunts, according to the pragmatist critique, environmental philosophy and results in its ideas being "inert" and falling "dead-born from the press" (ibid.). Consequently, the familiar pragmatist demand for a reconstruction of a discipline is raised – environmental ethics needs to be refashioned in a manner that makes it practically fruitful.

Thus, the starting point for environmental pragmatism is a twofold problem diagnosis, first with regard to the environment and second with regard to environmental ethics:

> We are deeply concerned about the precarious state of the natural world, the environmental hazards that threaten humans, and the long-term sustainable life on this planet. The environmental crisis that surrounds us is a fact of experience. It is thus imperative that environmental philosophy, as a discipline, address this crisis – its meaning, its causes and its possible solutions (Light / Katz 1996, 1).

The strong critical thrust against the field of environmental ethics may be kind of surprising, since the relatively

young discipline, emerged only about three decades earlier, apparently shares exactly these goals: addressing the environmental crisis by exploring "its meaning, its causes and its possible solutions". From its very beginning, environmental philosophers sought to identify the roots of the damaging and exploitive human practices with regard to nature, clarify the reasons for their permanence and made suggestions how to overcome them. This enterprise led not only to a shift of attention to environment-related topics, but to doubts about the frame of ethical theorizing itself. When Richard Routley asked "Are we in need for a new, an environmental ethic?" (Routley 1973) and pointed to "human chauvinism" as a major problem of morally acceptable dealings with non-human-nature, he advocated a fundamental shift of perspective which challenged the human-centered way of thinking about moral values. The issue of anthropocentrism is heavily debated until today and became a major objective of environmental philosophy, with large parts of the discussion centering around the question if it must be overcome, how this could happen or if a non-anthropocentric ethics is possible at all. Different models of enlarging the moral community beyond human beings are argued for and against, and bold alternative ways of conceptualizing the (moral) world are elaborated on. In a way, the revolution Routley asked for took place. Yet it remained philosophical, which is way Katz and Light consider it a failure, purely "intramural debates" (Light / Katz 1996, 1) that didn't make any difference in the real world. From a pragmatist standpoint, there couldn't be a harsher evaluation.

In consequence, environmental pragmatism was suggested as "a new *strategy* for approaching environmental philosophy and environmental issues" (Light / Katz 1996, 5). That is, its main intention is meta-philosophical as well as decidedly practical. In contrast to the idea of contributing to the ongoing discussions and developing just another position, for example by re-reading of the works of classical pragmatism in the light of contempo-

rary environmental concerns and debates, it demands a substantial shift with regard to how (and to which ends) environmental philosophy is done. This doesn't preclude to elaborate on John Dewey's concept of nature or discuss F.C.S. Schiller's hylozoism as a basis for moral holism. However, from a pragmatist perspective, this kind of considerations shouldn't take place on behalf of solving theoretical problems, but always with the practical intention of effective action. The search for adequate environmental policies and their implementation substitutes the quest for a single, unified position. The pragmatist turn, thus, involves a strong plea for a theoretical pluralism. Against this background, policy consensus is facilitated despite diverging ethical theories.

Ironically, another 30 years later, the same charge of ineffectiveness could be raised against environmental pragmatism. Notwithstanding the now six reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), annual United Nations Climate Change Conferences since 1995 that resulted in international treaties like the Kyoto-Protocol or the Paris Agreement, new environmental movements like *Fridays for Future* and a growing public awareness of environmental problems, the general trend towards deteriorating environmental conditions has not been changed. On the contrary, a lot of the factors that drive the ecological crisis (emissions, waste, industrial agriculture, mobility) even accelerated, leading to a worse situation with regard to global warming, biodiversity loss or freshwater availability. Measured by its own standards, environmental pragmatism is as much a failure as other accounts of environmental philosophy before: It didn't change the world for the better. Thus, we may ask if we are in need for a new environmental pragmatism.

In what follows, my aim is to suggest an answer to that question, which will, roughly, consist in the call for a reconstruction of environmental pragmatism. That is, I will adopt its general framework and thrust, the commitment to pluralism and practical melioration, and elaborate on it in the light of the current ecological situation. My main

thesis is that the Anthropocene, as a collective concept of the multiple and complex ecological crises, is best understood as a cultural problem, or problem of form of life, and that environmental pragmatism provides the means to cope with it, if we understand pragmatism, as Colin Koopman suggested, as theory and practice of hopeful cultural criticism (Koopman 2009). In order to advocate this alternative understanding of environmental pragmatism, I will start with an outline of the concept of the Anthropocene and why it alters the mode of thinking about addressing ecological problems. Then, I will argue for reconstructing environmental pragmatism by a critical alignment to the idea of meliorism. While meliorism as a general striving to the better is a pervasive undercurrent of pragmatist thinking, I propose to handle it as an ambiguous concept. After pointing out potentially problematic tendencies which can be shown to be effective in environmental pragmatism so far, I suggest two major conceptual shifts which emancipate environmental pragmatism from an all too narrow understanding of progress as well as of a promethean anthropology. Furthermore, I explore the practice of environmental pragmatism in a meliorist spirit. Following this outlook on its possible methods and strategies as well as some consequences for practicing philosophy, I briefly point to the existential dimension of meliorism and the essential role of hope for transformative action.

2. When Crisis Becomes Permanent: Entering the Anthropocene

Since its introduction a quarter-century ago, the concept of the Anthropocene, the "human age", quickly made a career in the social sciences and the humanities, and has been under critical surveillance. Its function as an academic and cultural buzzword even adds a slightly suspect ring to its tone. However, besides the legitimate discussion about its conceptual limitation and biases, the Anthropocene offers a uniquely productive diagnostic tool for analyzing the current ecological situation that does

not only grasp the planetary scale of the changes, but also inherently points to the role of human beings in that change. Originating in the geological sciences, the term was first used to describe a remarkable geo-physical record:

> The term Anthropocene suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and so profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita* (Steffen / Crutzen / McNeill 2007, 614).

The empirical finding that the range and scope of human intervention into the earth system makes humanity a dominant factor, alike to natural forces, engenders the idea of the dawn of a new age in which the human-nature-relation has to be fundamentally revised. From its very beginnings, human beings intervened in their environments in order to adapt them to their needs. Since as early as the neolithic revolution, humans began to shape crops, soil and animals to a larger extent, and the colonization of the Americas as well as the industrial revolution surely are historic landmarks of this process of fashioning, moulding and trimming. Yet the so-called "Great Acceleration", the period stretching from the end of World War II into the present, dwarfs those earlier developments. With its unprecedented increase of economic growth, resource depletion and waste production, it is widely accepted as a historic sea change and often presented as the starting point of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2015; Hamilton 2017, 2-21).

Currently, the most prominent aspect of the Anthropocene is anthropogenic climate change: The concentration of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has escalated since the industrial revolution and the heavy use of fossil energies. As a result, the global average temperature has risen, leading to an increase of extreme weather events as well as the melting of ice shields, glaciers and permafrost. Among the expected consequences, there are large-scale effects as changes in

the oceanic circulation system (with hitherto unforeseeable aftermath), the rise of sea levels, and even the deferral of the next ice age for a few hundred thousand years, a cyclical event that is usually driven by the orbital path of the earth around the sun. In addition to these massive effects on the level of the earth system, global warming results in a higher species extinction rate, more soil erosion and less availability of freshwater, crop failures, the propagation of tropical diseases and a general decline of physical and mental health. Last, but not least, even the sober language of the scientific scenarios of a warmer world give a glimpse of the dire effects on a social level, such as huge migration movements, harsh conflicts over resources and political destabilization (IPCC 2023).

Yet humanity's impact on the earth system goes beyond climate change. It becomes manifest in the pollution of air, soil and water. Micro- and nanoplastics can be found at any place in the world, including organisms and thereby food chains, the composition of the soil changes and biogeochemical cycles are altered. Human intervention shapes the face of the earth by managing the course of rivers and coastlines as well as moving large amounts of sand and stone and creating impervious surfaces. Moreover, human activity affects the evolutionary processes by transporting plants, animals and pathogens around the world, by the destruction of habitats or by using pesticides, antibiotics and genetically changed organisms.

All in all, we are facing environmental changes unprecedented in earth's history. Entering the Anthropocene marks a profound disruption: it is not only single landscapes or ecosystems, but earth as a complex and dynamic system, that is perturbed. What is at stake, are the reliable ecological conditions of the Holocene, the time period after the last ice age about 12.000 years ago, which fostered everything we deem human civilization: sedentism, agriculture, scripture, civil structures (Horn / Bergthaller 2019, 10-11). The parameter of the Holocene are the terms on which human life as we know it could sprout and is sustained: the way we are organized

is adapted to them and relies on them. If they become destabilized, we risk losing what Johan Rockström and his team call "a safe operating space for humanity" (Rockström et al. 2009). Their concept of the "planetary boundaries" illustrates the limits of human intervention, or rather: the danger connected to moving beyond them. There is a safe zone set by natural conditions that cannot be shifted at discretion. In consequence, the empirical findings bear a normative dimension, an urgent call to action. In order to avoid an unstable, unsafe future that would force humanity into a harsh battle of survival (and the suffering connected to it, including that of non-humans), a radical transformation of the way we interact with the environment had to take place, meaning a fundamental change of everyday life: the way we travel, reside, eat, use energy, produce and consume.

The diagnosis of the Anthropocene, thus, is a diagnosis of a severe crisis: its symptoms are serious with regard to (human) life on earth. Yet it would be misleading to think of the Anthropocene as just another, only more extensive, environmental crisis. Since the earth system as a whole is affected and the parameter of its functioning are irreversibly altered, it rather stands for a real sea change. Entering the Anthropocene means crossing a threshold (Horn / Bergthaller 2019, 9-10). There is no going back to the friendly conditions of the Holocene, the familiar framework is lost. That is, we are confronted with a new, unstable environmental normality, a permanent crisis. Given this non-transient character, there are good reasons for asking if the term crisis is apt at all for what we (and, still long after we will be gone, the earth system) are going through (Kersting 2024).

Employing the idea of the Anthropocene as a threshold also entails a change of perspective with regard to our temporal understanding of what happens, namely the insight that we are already in the middle of things. The environmental crisis is nothing yet to come and, though there is still much to fight for, cannot be prevented anymore. In a certain respect, it is too late. Furthermore, it is

important to understand that what happens is essentially different from natural catastrophes, though a lot of the events we take to identify the new epoch are certainly catastrophic. Instead, as Christian Schwägerl suggested, the storms, heatwaves and floods occurring in the Anthropocene are better framed as cultural catastrophes, since they result from the cumulated effects of human activity (Schwägerl 2012, 80). So if the Anthropocene points to a crisis, it is a crisis, or rather: meta-crisis, of certain practices and forms of life. It is, as Daniel Kersting has pointed out, a problem-solving problem that undermines self-maintenance and points to systemic conditions (Kersting 2024). This is why focusing on effective environmental policies is not enough. As a cultural problem, the Anthropocene has to be addressed on a deeper level, starting with overcoming what I would like to call eco-denialism, the socially structured blindness towards the ecological situation.

In large parts of the debate on what blocks the way to transforming into a more sustainable society, two main explanatory models shape the quest for solutions, as sociologist Kari Norgaard has pointed out: that either a lack of information or a lack of (moral) concern is responsible for the inadequate social and political reaction (Norgaard 2011, 1-12). Following these approaches, people just need to be better informed respectively need to become more morally sensitive. Though knowledge as well as moral sensitivity certainly play an important role with regard to adequate responses to environmental issues, neither more information nor more moral education alone will overcome the general inertia. Through a pragmatist lens, the virtual non-response on behalf of a majority of people can be analyzed as a problem of belief. We do not act because we do not believe there really is something to act upon. On a first level, phenomena like climate change or biodiversity loss are simply too big, too complex, too terrifying. The willed ignorance against them, at the moment most prominently against global warming, is thus a coping mechanism: not believing is crucial to our

emotion management (Norgaard 2011, 63-95). As Bruno Latour points out, this delusional negationism is prevalent (Latour 2017, 27-32). We all, to some degree, refuse to accept the reality of the Anthropocene.

However, I suggest to understand eco-denialism as rooted even deeper. In the Anthropocene, we are confronted not only with immense insecurities, fears and losses, we also have to deal with the fact that we became a dominant planetary power and that this comes with great responsibility. On the one hand, human activity is the cause of the present situation, it is man-made. Given the ecological disastrous outcome, at least some forms of human civilization, those that lead to the emergence of the new age, appear to be highly dubitable, if not outright wrong. What we have taken to be normal turns out to be toxic, damaging, perhaps evil. On the other hand, the diagnosis of the Anthropocene from its very beginnings highlighted human responsibility for its further development (Steffen/Crutzen/McNeill 2007, 618-620). The future depends on us, on our activities and interventions. That is, on a second level, eco-denialism protects ourselves in an even more essential sense, since our sense of normality, our way of life and our self-images (as morally good) are threatened. Norgaard convincingly explores in her exemplary study of a Norwegian small town, how the inability, or rather: refusal, to accept reality warrants the legitimacy of a form of life (Norgaard 2011, 13-31, 137-175). The socially organized denial stabilizes the (group) identity, what we do and who we are, and allows for business-as-usual.

Eco-denialism thus corresponds with the paradoxical epistemological state of "knowing and not knowing" (Norgaard 2011, 52-62), or what Jonathan Safran Foer calls, after Felix Frankfurter, "knowledge-without-belief" (Safran Foer 2019, 66-70): We do have all the relevant information and still don't act. And, against Foer's analysis, we also care. And that we care, even a lot, is exactly the reason why we cannot and do not want to believe in what we know (Leertzman 2008). Whereas both the

information deficit model and the lack of moral concern model focuses on the individual level (and see individual failure), my suggestion is to focus on the cultural preconditions, the practices and theoretical frameworks that feed eco-denialism.

Environmental pragmatism, in order to meet its aspirations and address the crisis adequately, thus is in need for a reconstruction. In the light of the Anthropocene, it must accommodate the cultural nature of the problem and provide means to cope with it. In what follows, I argue that both ends are met by a critical alignment to the idea of meliorism.

3. Environmental Pragmatism in a Meliorist Spirit
The Ambiguity of Meliorist Thinking

Meliorism, in a broad sense, means to strive for the better. The concept emerged around the same time – but independently – from pragmatism, and it was William James who adopted it only a short time later (Bergman 2015, 4-6). Meliorism, as presented by one of its early promoters, James Sully, is "a practical conception which lies midway between the extremes of optimism and pessimism" (Bergman 2015, 4-5). In contrast to both optimism and pessimism, meliorism is an active or activating attitude that relies on a voluntarist conception of human action and the idea of a principled malleability of the world. This understanding resonates with James' introduction, who links optimism and pessimism with the belief that salvation is inevitable respectively impossible and presents meliorism as a midway position between those certainties: "Meliorism treats salvation as neither necessary nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become" (James 1981, 128).

James suggests meliorism as the worldview most adequate to pragmatism, an attitude which highlights the possibility of a better world through human engagement as well as the precarious state of the world. The idea of meliorism thus has two dimensions: First, the existential attitude, which focuses on the individual and its search for a meaningful life, and second, the socially engaged, transformative practice, which highlights the amelioration of society. Both dimensions manifest differently throughout pragmatist thinking. Whereas James is typically presented as champion of individualism with only marginal interest in social issues, Dewey stands for a downright social progressivism. However, I suggest to understand both dimensions as not only inherently intertwined but also as necessary mutual correctives. Without its counterpart, each dimension turns into a mere caricature of pragmatist meliorism, either as philosophy of personal well-being or as utilitarian social engineering. One striking example of the latter is F.C.S. Schiller's advocacy of eugenics and fascism as instruments for social progress, which illuminates an extreme, but possible embodiment of pragmatist meliorism (Honnacker 2020b, 79-81, Bergman 2015, 12-14). Apart from the obvious political dubiousness, this line of meliorism relies on a rather promethean understanding of the human capacity to control and design the world. Furthermore, it is oriented towards an ideal outcome and employs a technical top-down approach to realize it. In the end, the fundamental pragmatist insight and recognition of thoroughgoing pluralism is betrayed.

Both tendencies are also prominent in environmental pragmatism in its current form. It is characterized by a strong emphasis on efficacy and expediency, which, at first sight, just seems to be a consequent elaboration of the pragmatist demand to make a real difference in the world and change it to the better. So one shouldn't be surprised that, as Christopher Maboloc notes, "[p]ragmatists are always in search of workable solutions" (Maboloc 2016, 109). Yet a too narrow focus on feasibility threatens to collapse environmental pragmatism into mere outcome-oriented problem-solving. If environmental pragmatism is foremost about providing "ready, viable

immediate policy solutions which are compatible with current political or economic systems" (Light 2010, 324 – cited after Maboloc 2016), it turns blind to the conditions and possible implications of its success. Maboloc pointed to the problematic consequences of this all too practical version of environmental pragmatism, especially with regard to societies with weak or corrupt (political) institutions, in which vested interests shape policy-processes. Factoring out value debates and relying on cost-benefit analysis as the method of choice result in severe deficits with regard to democracy (Maboloc 2016). Moreover, framing ecological problems mainly in economic terms bears not only the problem of correct calculation, for example with regard to discounting future damages, it is also questionable as a comprehensive matrix of ascribing values (Jamieson 2017, 105-146).

The ideal of maximizing efficiency and expediency thus leads environmental pragmatism to be an instance of what critics always saw in the pragmatist tradition, notwithstanding the protestation of its proponents: a rather technocratic and – in the worst sense – utilitarian approach to design the world at human will. The general demand of immediate action, for example with regard to global warming, feeds into this truncated meliorist perspective. Against the background of the unfolding ecological emergency, politics are under severe pressure of time. The more urgent transformation is needed, the more legitimate appears a focus on mere outcome, which undermines deliberative and participatory processes. Democracy and "green" politics seem to become increasingly conflicting (Honnacker 2020a, 1-8).

Apart from this problematic political tendency, the meliorist undercurrent of environmental pragmatism fosters a rather instrumentalist relation to nature, since it premises, at least to a certain extent, the idea of human control over environmental conditions. This promethean anthropology pervades parts of the debate on the Anthropocene and seems even grounded in the very concept of the human age (Hamilton 2013, 1-19, 107-137,

199-205). A most striking manifestation can be found in ecomodernist approaches which advocate technological fixes (such as geo-engineering or nuclear energy) in order to arrive at a "good", even "great Anthropocene" (Asafu-Adjade et al. 2015) and aim to drive the "humanization" of planet earth as far as possible (Schwägerl 2012). It is not surprising that some ecomodernists adopted the label "climate pragmatism" (Nordhaus et al. 2017). These approaches do not only utterly overestimate the capacities of human intervention and invention, they also reinforce human-nature-relations which contributed to harmful ecological practices in the past, leading to the Anthropocene in the first place.

Focussing on making a real difference for the better thus threatens to result in a rather shallow version of environmental pragmatism which is inadequate for dealing with the ecological crisis and its preconditions on a deeper, systemic level. Nevertheless, I suggest to acknowledge and endorse meliorism as a central feature of a more sound version of environmental pragmatism, since it bears the potential to accommodate pragmatist environmental thinking to the conditions of the Anthropocene and to address it as a problem-solving problem. This accommodation leads to a fundamental reconstruction of how environmental pragmatism works in two major aspects.

Two Emancipatory Shifts

In a nutshell, the meliorist drive of environmental pragmatism must be emancipated from a narrow, technical understanding of progress as well as from the idea of malleability in the sense of human mastery of the world. First, this means to let go of efficacy and expediency as leading principles. Without denying the urgency of the crises or the need for a quick response, meliorism is able to provide a richer, more comprehensive idea of what it means to strive to the better. Following the general pragmatist abstinence from substantial definitions of the

good, meliorism adopts a normatively modest negativist approach which marks it as an inherently critical project. In contrast to approaches that are oriented towards certain, prefixed ideals, its methodological starting point are concrete problems, faults and failures that perturb a particular social formation. Solving these problems rests on a careful identification and description of the problem and encompasses deliberative and experimental elements. Including different perspectives, especially of those affected by the problem, becomes an essential part of the problem-solving process, since it warrants the best possible outcome, not only in the sense of drawing on the largest possible resource of knowledge, but also in a constitutive sense: Instead of appealing to prefigured ideal solutions, meliorism relies on cooperative and creative processes. How a problem might be addressed (and what counts as a problem in the first place) must be collectively elaborated. The debate on values, on shared interests and desirable futures thus cannot be suspended in favor of predetermined outcomes, even if they claim to be well-intentioned or their implementation seems necessary. Abstaining from a potentially paternalist a priori determination of certain policies underlines the need for well-designed procedures of deliberation and participation. Meliorism thus is inconsistent with prescriptive politics, no matter its goals. Consequently, environmental pragmatism in a meliorist spirit comes with a strong plea for democracy, or rather: for a democratization of (green) politics (Honnacker 2020a, 10-14). Even though democratic procedures might be slower and are perceived as less effective in contrast to authoritarian approaches, striving for the better includes much more than a certain outcome, for example improving social justice, maintaining liberal rights or adopting an alternative vision of the common good, which in turn promotes social and political conditions that foster better problem-solving. The proposed understanding of meliorism thus calls to action, yet also demands to slow down the process of problem-solving in order to improve the situa-

tion (Maboloc (2016, 112). As Whitney Bauman and Kevin O'Brian suggest, this deceleration is essential in a situation that is marked by profound uncertainties as well as by theoretical and normative pluralism: „No single moral principle, sacred cow, or ideal of progress can match either the problems of climate change or the diverse human communities involved in them. […] We need an ethics of uncertainty, moving at the pace of ambiguity" (Bauman / O'Brian 2020, 3).

Second, reconstructing environmental pragmatism in the light of the Anthropocene necessitates a more humble view of humankind, both with regard to the understanding of the role of human beings in the course of history and to their relation to nature. Even though humankind must be recognized as a major geological force that shapes the future of the earth system, by now it becomes more and more apparent that the human age fails to be the next chapter in the story of human progress, which is intimately connected to the conquest and domination of nature. Yet this story has been ignorant of the fact that flourishing human life depends on certain material conditions. The problem here is not so much that this view is anthropocentric, but that it rests on a rather arrogant humanism which lacks an adequate sensitivity for the limits of human action as well as the vulnerability of human life. As such, it is part of the cultural conditions of eco-denialism, since it fosters a sense of human invincibility and an ever ongoing idea of progress that turns out to be suicidal, since it is unable to envision catastrophe. This is what Günther Anders, in the context of nuclear annihilation, called "apocalyptic blindness" *(Apokalypseblindheit)*: our imagination is constricted by the idea of perpetual progress, we are unable to think of a future that is not "like the present, only better". As a consequence, we cannot acknowledge the danger of our current situation nor feel the adequate fear. Instead, we stay indolent (Anders 1956). Moreover, the shared narrative of progressivism, a world that gets only better and better, provides the interpretational scheme

for any experience. That is, extreme weather events or decline in insect populations are not seen as part of a catastrophic development (or of the new normality of the Anthropocene), but as freak events, singular, isolated extreme phenomena. The meta-story is not questioned, ecocide is just no option.

Meliorism, in contrast, operates with a conception of history that abstains from any teleological principles. If there is to be any progress, it is because of learning-processes which could have failed. Consequently, the future is viewed as indeterminate, open to changes in any direction, for better or for worse. That is, meliorism comes with a high awareness of failure, regress and even total shipwreck – an option that becomes increasingly probable with crossing more and more planetary boundaries. History works neither for or against humanity. Rather, it is understood as the result of an interplay of material necessities and human action. This openness of the future course is the very condition for the possibility of making a difference in the world. It not only allows for human engagement, but also calls for it, at least if a moral standpoint is taken that links that possibility, or rather: ability, with responsibility. In this respect, adopting meliorism connects environmental pragmatism to other approaches that highlight human responsibility, such as Clive Hamilton's "new anthropocentrism" (Hamilton 2017), yet employs a modest humanism that tempers promethean aspirations. Though epistemic anthropocentrism seems unavoidable in a pragmatist framework, drawing on meliorist thinking facilitates to elaborate an adequate anthropology in terms of human self-understanding and moral orientation in the Anthropocene. Whereas environmental pragmatism surely is compatible with a wide range of ethical positions between the poles of moral anthropocentrism and moral holism, it should never fail to acknowledge the interdependence of human life, non-human life and the earth system, and meliorism provides the minimal background assumptions for relating human beings to the world in such a way. It de-centers human beings, while at the same time it holds to human exceptionalism with regard to the obligation to act (Honnacker 2020b, 81-85).

Meliorist Strategies

So far, I have outlined two major theoretical shifts implied by adopting a meliorist perspective. In what follows, I provide an outlook on how these shifts turn out on a more practical level, that is, with regard to methodology and strategy. Very basically, and very much in accordance with the initial self-understanding of environmental pragmatists, meliorism strongly advocates what Dale Jamieson called a competitive methodological pluralism:

> There is no single category of response to climate change that has precedence over all others nor any privileged policies that must be enacted no matter the alternatives. There are only better and worse responses at different temporal and spatial scales, each of which must stand on its own feet in a way that complements other efforts that are underway (Jamieson 2017, 235).

Instead of arguing about the one best solution to a given problem, meliorism acknowledges that there is no flawless way of addressing complex situations: „It is time to stop letting the perfect (as if we knew what that is anyway) be the enemy of the good. People should work to implement as many good responses as possible" (Jamieson 2017, 236). However, turning away from the quest for ideal solutions does not lead to a less engaged attitude. On the contrary, meliorism in the suggested sense has a strong affinity to ethical perfectionism (Koopman 2009, 133-156), so that environmental pragmatism turns into a project of doing ones best, even against all odds. That is, environmental pragmatism in the meliorist spirit calls for commitment even if it is unclear if our actions have decisive impact (or any impact at all). This adaptation is relevant with regard to the ongoing debate about individual and collective responsibility in environmental ethics that takes place mainly in a utilitarian framework. And it is decisive in the face of problems like global warming or mass

extinction, which seem unsolvable just by scale and complexity and thus invite indifference: it may appear futile to change any behavior if the only criterion of a reasonable action is its outcome. A perfectionist approach, in contrast, with its focus on the question of personal integrity, is more suitable in the light of decreasing possibilities of effective environmental intervention, since it highlights the role of moral struggle. Perfectionist meliorism, thus, adequately addresses the conditions of moral action in the Anthropocene. In addition, as Jamieson notes, the effect of personal commitment for a better world may not be underestimated: It affects others and promotes the feeling of self-efficacy. That is, it promotes a sense of a life worth living even if our actions fail to succeed (Jamieson 2017, 182-184), something desperately needed in the unreliable world to come. One worthwhile manifestation of that striving is to engage in the practice of cultural criticism, one dimension of addressing the crisis neglected so far by environmental pragmatism.

If the Anthropocene, as suggested above, is understood as a crisis of a certain form of life, it needs to be dealt with on a deep level. Following Colin Koopman's suggestion of pragmatism as an "engaged form of philosophical practice in which philosophy is best understood as meliorist cultural criticism" (Koopman 2009, 5), environmental pragmatism could contribute to reveal and reconstruct ecologically harmful and unjust practices. Koopman presents meliorist cultural criticism as a mainly genealogical project, that is, he suggests to find the material for critical inquiry foremost in history, and especially in moments of failures (Koopman 2009, 195-196). Studying historical material can tell us something about social and political constellations which promote unsustainable ways of life and even ecocide, as for example Jared Diamond has compellingly demonstrated in his study on collapsed societies (Diamond 2005). Moreover, history offers examples of re-evaluation and change of once established practices which became doubtful at some point. They ceased to be "normal" (or "natural"),

thereby lost their immunity to criticism and eventually were modified or even disposed. Exposing the contingency of practices is essential to transformation, since it shows that it "could have been otherwise" and can be different in the future.

Although the genealogical approach is undoubtedly relevant and enables to take a critical distance to current practices, I propose to complement it by drawing on critical social philosophy. Like genealogical criticism, it aims at revealing the contingency of established cultural norms. However, it allows to take a less backward-looking and more active stance, since it focuses on the status quo and offers the theoretical means of identifying and addressing current unjust or harmful practices and their ideological roots and systemic preconditions. Considering the hitherto tenacious nonresponse to the ecological situation and the self-defensive character of eco-denialism, problematization will not take place without a proactive questioning the interpretational frames or schemes that sustain our way of life.

If one aim of environmental pragmatism is to address the "crisis of belief" (Foer 2019, 16) and thereby to overcome the dangerous indolence, it needs to engage in criticism of ideology. Following Sally Haslanger, ideology is "a set of widely shared beliefs that aim to justify the status quo" (Haslanger 2023a, 166). Meliorist (environmental) pragmatism then could be understood as critical theory in the widest sense, a project of exposing and problematizing ideology. This project goes beyond pointing out "wrong" beliefs, moral or otherwise, or advert damaging effects of practices. It aims at illuminating the systemic and structural configurations of our beliefs and practices as well as the mutual processes of stabilization which makes them so robust: Our way of life shapes our beliefs and interpretations, our feelings and evaluations, which in turn feed into our practices that constitute our way of life. If possessing and driving a car is a social hallmark of prosperity, it is hard to consider car-based individual mobility to be a problematic way of moving from one place

to another. It is a common practice that doesn't need a second thought. We build our cities to conform to this ideal of transportation. Our beliefs turned literally into concrete that determines the way we can move through our environment.

Very much in accordance with pragmatist ideas of human co-creation of reality, Haslanger describes the feedback-loops between our cultural schemes and the world we live in (and, actually, even ourselves), which renders it extremely difficult to criticize our way of life:

> Our responsiveness is mediated by social meanings and signaling mechanisms—I call this a cultural technē—that enable members of the group to communicate, coordinate, and manage the things taken to have value. This will create loops: culture provides tools to interpret some part of the world as valuable (or not), i.e., as a resource, and offers guidance for how to properly interact with it. In turn, our interaction with a resource affects it: we grow it, shape it, manage it, distribute it, dispose of it, etc. And how it responds to our actions affects our ongoing interactions with it. In cases where a practice takes hold, we shape ourselves and the resource in order to facilitate the ongoing practice. (Haslanger 2023a, 164)

To a certain extent, these "feedback loops" are inevitable. We cannot live or take a stance "outside" of our form of life. We always participate and perpetuate. Yet, as Haslanger notes, the societies we live in are not homogenous, but complex and show "some degree of fragmentation and dysfunction. Such fragmentation is both a blessing and a curse, for, as the saying goes, the cracks are where the light gets in" (Haslanger, 2023b, 10). These dysfunctions are like little stumbling stones on an otherwise well-paved road. They allow, at least potentially, for doubts, grounded in a feeling or hunch that there might be something wrong and could be done better. That is, we can make experiences that potentially change the way we see and evaluate reality. And making this kind of experiences can be promoted, for example by resistant practices such as creating counter-publics, acts of linguistic sabotage, or other disturbances of normal everyday-life that challenge the common (moral) sense. Haslanger pleas for an engaged and embedded practice of critique:

> However, critique cannot be done from an armchair: It is not merely an investigation into and reflection on social relations. Critique happens while engaged in practice as it becomes clear that the social know how we are relying on to organize us is harmful or wrong – perhaps we begin to find practices wasteful […] morally intolerable, or in other ways problematic. In reasonable good circumstances, the task is then to find ways of collectively reorienting ourselves to each other and the world. This happens by collective trial and error. (Haslanger 2023a, 169)

Following the suggestion of meliorist environmental pragmatism as not only theory but also practice of cultural criticism, it is clear that it cannot be considered to happen from a detached (and allegedly epistemically privileged or neutral) observer-perspective. Instead, it has to be acknowledged that it is practiced from within a concrete cultural and social situation and must develop its critical interventions from this standpoint and in collaboration with other humanities, arts and sciences (Koopman 2009, 197-200). Practicing environmental pragmatism, then, involves to move beyond the academic circle, for example by way of writing for a broader audience, experimenting with forms of public philosophy or engaging in social movements. It could mean to irritate common beliefs about what good transportation looks like by organizing a bicycle rally or to question a vulgar understanding of freedom by giving a public lecture on John Stuart Mill. That is, meliorist practices of cultural criticism cover a wide range of rather small acts of disturbance and engendering doubts, none of which will tip the system. Its revolutionary impetus is not realized by a single upheaval (which is unattainable with regard to the complexity of the situation), but by multifarious transformative interventions that disrupt and eventually refashion the feedback-lops.

Meliorism as uncertain hope

Finally, highlighting the meliorist dimension of a pragmatist account of environmentalism offers the conceptual means to deal with the ecological situation on an existential level. As outlined, meliorism fundamentally

relies on the idea of an open future. This non-teleological, non-determinist understanding of history is the basic premise of the possibility of human intervention. However, the acknowledgment of the precarious state of the world, a world that may be saved, to draw on James' image, forbids any optimism. Rather, it demands hope. First, hope is a condition for change, and therefore essential for meliorist strivings, as Koopman underlines: "The central idea of meliorism is that a philosophically robust conception of hope can function as a guide for critique and inquiry" (Koopman 2009, 16). The assumption that "another world is possible" motivates criticism and drives resistant practices. Meliorist hope thus is an active attitude towards the world (Koopman 2009, 16-20) and demands engagement instead of fostering quietism.

Second, because a turn for the better is far from guaranteed, meliorism restricts itself to an "uncertain hope" (Koopman 2009, 20). As Bauman and O'Brian pointed out, much of what is presented as hope, especially in an environmental context, just extends the present and bets on the cultural and technological means already at hand. Yet such "projections of certainty" (Bauman / O'Brian 2020, 17) are not sufficient in the complex and incalculable world of the Anthropocene. Environmental pragmatism in a meliorist spirit thus abstains from eco-optimism as well as from eco-pessimism and adopts a middle-position adequate to an already damaged, but not completely devastated world. It may be "too late" to go back to the Holocene. But there is still much to fight for, as Jamieson underlines: "It still matters what we do. Failures can be greater or lesser, and we live more or less successfully with the changes we bring about" (Jamieson 2017, 11).

Conclusion

I have argued for an environmental pragmatism in a meliorist spirit. Adopting this alternative version involves conceptual shifts with regard to what it means to make a difference for the better. My suggestion was to abstain from the ideals of efficiency and control and acknowledge meliorism as a call for responding to an uncertain future, including the possibility of total shipwreck. While the Anthropocene is a potentially self-destructive cultural crisis, I have advocated a democratic deceleration in order to address its character as a problem-solving problem. In order to strive for (social) improvement, we need comprehensive collective processes of deliberation and, above all, re-orientation. Environmental pragmatism as a transformative project relies on a pluralist methodology of practicing cultural criticism that aims at disrupting our common sense beliefs, everyday practices and eventually our harmful way of life. It remains a major challenge to create adequate philosophical interventions. Since academic philosophy in large parts, including pragmatism and critical theory, is at odds with the idea of being engaged in the real world and its problems, the need for a new self-understanding of what philosophers do may be as virulent as the need for a new environmental ethics.

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