

POSTANTHROPOCENTRISM IN THE WORKS OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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Abstract. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) is widely regarded as one of the most influential nineteenth-century American writers on humanity's relationship with the natural world. Although the term postanthropocentrism belongs to much later philosophical and critical traditions, many of its central concerns can be anticipated in Thoreau's writings. His works challenge the assumption that human beings occupy an exceptional and dominant position within nature and question the rigid distinction between the human and the nonhuman. In *Walden*, "Walking," *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, and his extensive journals, Thoreau presents humans as participants in a larger ecological and spiritual community rather than as masters of nature. His attention to animals, plants, weather, seasons, geological processes, and wilderness gives nonhuman existence a significance that cannot be reduced entirely to human utility. At the same time, Thoreau's thought remains partly anthropocentric because he frequently values nature for its capacity to educate, transform, and spiritually enrich human beings. This article argues that Thoreau should therefore be understood not as a fully postanthropocentric thinker in the contemporary sense, but as an important precursor to postanthropocentric thought. His writings destabilize human exceptionalism and open the possibility of understanding humanity as embedded within a larger more-than-human world.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, postanthropocentrism, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, environmental humanities, *Walden*, wilderness, human-nature relationship, nonhuman world.

ГЕНРИ ДЕВИД ТОРО ИЖОДИДА ПОСТАНТРОПОЦЕНТРИЗМ

Annotatsiya. Genri Devid Toro (1817–1862) inson va tabiat olami o'rtasidagi munosabatlarni yoritgan XIX asr Amerika adabiyotining eng nufuzli namoyandalaridan biri sifatida e'tirof etiladi. Postantropotsentrizm atamasi ancha keyingi davr falsafiy va tanqidiy yo'nalishlarida shakllangan bo'lsa-da, uning asosiy g'oyalarini Toroning asarlaridayoq kuzatish mumkin. Uning ijodi insonning tabiatdagi alohida va hukmron mavqega egaligi haqidagi qarashlarni shubha ostiga qo'yadi hamda inson va noinsoniy mavjudotlar o'rtasidagi qat'iy chegaralarni qayta ko'rib chiqishga undaydi. Toro «Uolden yoki o'rmondagi hayot», «Sayr», «Meyn o'rmonlari», «Keyp-Kod» asarlari va keng qamrovli kundaliklarida insonni tabiatning hukmdori sifatida emas, balki kengroq ekologik va ma'naviy hamjamiyatning ishtirokchisi sifatida tasvirlaydi. Uning hayvonlar, o'simliklar, ob-havo hodisalari, fasllar, geologik jarayonlar va yovvoyi tabiatga bo'lgan e'tibori noinsoniy mavjudotlarning ahamiyatini inson manfaatlari bilan to'liq cheklab bo'lmasligini ko'rsatadi. Shu bilan birga, Toro tafakkurida antropotsentrik xususiyatlar ham qisman saqlanib qoladi, chunki u tabiatni ko'pincha insonni tarbiyalash, o'zgartirish va ma'naviy jihatdan boyitish imkoniyati orqali qadrlaydi. Maqolada Toroni zamonaviy ma'nodagi to'liq postantropotsentrik mutafakkir sifatida emas, balki postantropotsentrik tafakkurning muhim o'tmishdoshlaridan biri sifatida tushunish lozimligi asoslanadi. Uning asarlari insonning mutlaq ustunligi haqidagi qarashlarni beqarorlashtiradi va insoniyatni insondan kengroq, ko'p mavjudotli olamning uzviy qismi sifatida anglash imkoniyatini ochib beradi.

Kalit so'zlar: Genri Devid Toro, postantropotsentrizm, antropotsentrizm, ekotsentrizm, ekologik gumanitar fanlar, «Uolden», yovvoyi tabiat, inson va tabiat munosabatlari, noinsoniy olam.

ПОСТАНТРОПОЦЕНТРИЗМ В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ ГЕНРИ ДЭВИДА ТОРО

Аннотация. Генри Дэвид Торо (1817–1862) широко признан одним из наиболее влиятельных американских писателей XIX века, исследовавших взаимоотношения человека и природного мира. Хотя термин «постантропоцентризм» возник значительно позже, в рамках современных философских и критических направлений, многие его ключевые идеи можно обнаружить уже в произведениях Торо. Его творчество подвергает сомнению представление об исключительном и господствующем положении человека в природе, а также о жёстком разграничении человеческого и нечеловеческого. В произведениях «Уолден, или Жизнь в лесу», «Прогулка», «Леса Мэна», «Мыс Код» и многочисленных дневниковых записях Торо представляет человека как участника

более широкого экологического и духовного сообщества, а не как повелителя природы. Его внимание к животным, растениям, погодным явлениям, временам года, геологическим процессам и дикой природе придаёт нечеловеческому существованию значение, которое невозможно полностью свести к человеческой пользе. Вместе с тем мышление Торо сохраняет отдельные антропоцентрические черты, поскольку он нередко оценивает природу с точки зрения её способности обучать, преобразовывать и духовно обогащать человека. В статье обосновывается положение о том, что Торо следует рассматривать не как полностью постантропоцентрического мыслителя в современном понимании, а как важного предшественника постантропоцентрической мысли. Его произведения ставят под сомнение человеческую исключительность и открывают возможность понимания человечества как неотъемлемой части более широкого, превосходящего человеческие пределы мира.

Ключевые слова: Генри Дэвид Торо, постантропоцентризм, антропоцентризм, экоцентризм, экологические гуманитарные науки, «Уолден», дикость, взаимоотношения человека и природы, нечеловеческий мир.

1. Introduction. The relationship between humanity and the natural world has become one of the central concerns of contemporary philosophy, literary studies, environmental humanities, and ecological thought. One of the most important developments in this field has been the emergence of approaches that challenge anthropocentrism, or the assumption that human beings constitute the primary measure of value and occupy a privileged position in existence. Postanthropocentric thought questions the traditional hierarchy separating human beings from animals, plants, ecosystems, material environments, and other forms of nonhuman existence.

Although the theoretical vocabulary of postanthropocentrism belongs largely to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its intellectual roots can be traced much further back. Among nineteenth-century writers, Henry David Thoreau occupies a particularly important position. His writings repeatedly question human superiority over nature and challenge the assumption that the natural world exists simply for human consumption.

Thoreau's importance lies not only in his celebration of wilderness but also in his attempt to redefine the human being's place within nature. In "Walking," for example, he declares his desire "to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." This formulation is particularly significant for a postanthropocentric reading because it undermines the opposition between "human" and "nature."

Jason P. Matzke similarly argues that Thoreau developed an understanding of human beings as physically, spiritually, and attitudinally connected with the surrounding natural world. Philip Cafaro goes further, identifying Thoreau as a leading critic of anthropocentrism and emphasizing his anticipation of arguments concerning the intrinsic value of nature.

Yet Thoreau's position is not completely free from anthropocentrism. He repeatedly turns to nature because he believes that nature can make human beings wiser, freer, healthier, and spiritually richer. His environmental argument therefore retains a human-centered dimension. Matzke explicitly observes this tension, describing the environmental argument emerging from Thoreau's philosophy as "quite human-centered," while nevertheless emphasizing the importance of Thoreau's insight that human beings are part of a larger whole.

This tension is central to the present discussion. Thoreau should not simply be labeled a "postanthropocentric writer." Rather, his works can be understood as anticipating postanthropocentric thought by challenging human exceptionalism, destabilizing the human/nature boundary, recognizing the significance of nonhuman life, and presenting the human being as embedded within a larger more-than-human world.

2. From Anthropocentrism to Postanthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism places human beings at the center of ethical, philosophical, and cultural consideration. In a strongly anthropocentric worldview, nature is primarily understood according to its usefulness to humanity. Forests become sources of timber, animals become sources of food or labor, rivers become resources, and land becomes property.

Postanthropocentrism challenges this hierarchy. It does not necessarily mean that human beings have no special characteristics or responsibilities. Rather, it questions the assumption that humanity's interests automatically have greater value than those of nonhuman beings and ecological systems.

A postanthropocentric perspective therefore asks several fundamental questions:

Is humanity genuinely separate from nature?

Do animals and other nonhuman beings possess value independently of human usefulness?

Can nature be understood as an active participant rather than a passive object?

What happens when the boundary between human and nonhuman becomes less rigid?

Can human identity itself be understood as ecological and relational?

These questions provide a productive framework for reading Thoreau.

It would be anachronistic to claim that Thoreau possessed the contemporary theoretical concept of postanthropocentrism. Nevertheless, his writing repeatedly approaches these questions. His famous formulation that human beings are "part and parcel of Nature" is particularly important because it reverses the traditional hierarchy: humanity is not outside nature looking at it from above but is one component of a larger reality.

3. Walden: Challenging Human Separation from Nature

Thoreau's Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854) provides the clearest literary foundation for a postanthropocentric interpretation.

At Walden Pond, Thoreau attempts to simplify his life and establish a more direct relationship with the natural

environment. The experiment is partly philosophical: he wants to discover what is essential to human existence.

At first, this purpose appears anthropocentric. Thoreau goes to the woods because he wants to improve his own life. Nature is valuable because it provides spiritual, intellectual, and moral benefits.

Yet the deeper structure of Walden gradually undermines this human-centered perspective. The pond is not merely a beautiful setting for Thoreau's experiment. It possesses its own rhythms and processes. The ice, water, fish, birds, plants, weather, soil, and changing seasons participate in a complex world that exists independently of human purposes.

Thoreau's attention continually shifts away from human society toward this larger world.

His famous statement that human beings need the "tonic of wildness" illustrates this relationship. Wild nature is not merely a decorative background to human existence; it is something necessary for maintaining the vitality of the world and of human beings themselves. The Walden Woods Project's collection of Thoreau's writings shows how frequently he connected wildness with freedom and with the continuing vitality of the world.

Thus Walden begins with a human question—"How should I live?"—but the attempt to answer that question leads Thoreau toward a broader ecological question: How should human beings live within the more-than-human world?

This movement is one of the foundations of a postanthropocentric reading.

4. The Human Being as "Part and Parcel of Nature"

The most explicit challenge to anthropocentrism appears in Thoreau's essay "Walking."

He writes:

"I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature."

This statement is crucial because Thoreau does not merely argue that humans depend upon nature. He argues that humans belong to nature.

The distinction is philosophically important. If humans merely depend upon nature, nature can still be imagined as something external that humans need for survival. But if humans are themselves part of nature, then the conventional opposition between humanity and nature becomes problematic.

Contemporary postanthropocentrism similarly questions the idea of an autonomous human subject standing outside the material world. Thoreau's formulation anticipates this relational understanding of human existence.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that Thoreau's conception of nature led him to "reimagine who the human being is," precisely because society tends to construct an image of humans as separate from the natural environment.

In this sense, Thoreau's environmental philosophy is also a philosophy of human identity. To understand what it means to be human, one must understand humanity's embeddedness in the natural world.

5. "Wildness" and the Decentering of Humanity

Thoreau's concept of wildness is perhaps his most important contribution to a postanthropocentric interpretation.

His famous statement, "In Wildness is the preservation of the World," is frequently treated as an early environmentalist slogan. Yet wildness in Thoreau is more complex than simply "wilderness."

Wildness represents what remains beyond complete human control.

This is important because anthropocentrism is closely connected with the desire to make the world conform to human purposes. Thoreau repeatedly criticizes this desire. The civilized human being cuts forests, cultivates land, controls animals, builds roads, divides territory, and converts nature into property.

Wildness represents the resistance of the world to this total human domination.

Thoreau writes in his journal that "the civilized man regards the pine tree as his enemy." The statement exposes the conflict between a human-centered economic system and the independent existence of the nonhuman world.

The postanthropocentric significance of wildness therefore lies in the recognition that nature does not exist simply as passive material waiting to be organized by humans. Nature has its own processes.

It grows.

It changes.

It resists.

It surprises.

It exceeds human knowledge.

And, most importantly, it cannot be completely controlled.

6. Animals as Subjects Rather Than Objects

Thoreau's treatment of animals also contributes to a postanthropocentric interpretation.

Traditional anthropocentrism tends to understand animals according to their usefulness to humans. Thoreau, however, spends considerable time observing animals for their own behavior and existence.

His journals contain detailed observations of birds, mammals, insects, fish, and other forms of life. Modern research has even examined the accuracy and scientific value of Thoreau's historical observations of plants and animals, concluding that he was a reliable observer and naturalist.

This close attention changes the relationship between observer and observed.

The animal is no longer simply an object belonging to the human world.

It has its own patterns of behavior.

It inhabits its own environment.

It participates in ecological relationships.

It possesses a life that does not depend upon human recognition.

This becomes particularly evident in *The Maine Woods*, where Thoreau's encounter with the moose leads him to criticize hunting undertaken merely for the pleasure of killing. He compares such killing to shooting a neighbor's horses, thereby challenging the idea that humans have unlimited moral authority over animals.

The animal thus becomes something more than a resource.

It becomes a fellow inhabitant of the world.

7. *The Maine Woods: Encountering the Nonhuman Other*

The Maine Woods is particularly valuable for examining the limits of anthropocentric control.

Thoreau's encounter with the wilderness does not simply confirm the superiority of the human observer. Instead, the wilderness confronts him with something that exceeds his expectations.

In the "Ktaadn" chapter, nature appears "primeval, untamed, and forever untamable." The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* emphasizes this aspect of Thoreau's thought: nature is not always gentle or benevolent toward humans, and its power exceeds human expectations.

This is highly significant from a postanthropocentric perspective.

A human-centered worldview often assumes that the world can ultimately be understood and organized according to human categories. Thoreau's wilderness experiences challenge that confidence.

Nature does not exist merely to satisfy human needs.

It can be indifferent.

It can be dangerous.

It can be mysterious.

It can exceed human understanding.

The human subject consequently loses some of its privileged position.

The wilderness becomes an encounter with otherness—with forms of existence that cannot be reduced to human categories.

8. *Cape Cod and Human Vulnerability*

A similar pattern appears in *Cape Cod*.

The sea, sand, storms, tides, winds, and geological processes demonstrate the vulnerability of human beings in relation to larger natural forces.

Modern civilization creates an illusion of control. Houses, roads, institutions, technologies, and economic systems make people feel that they have mastered their environment.

Thoreau's encounters with the coast expose the fragility of that illusion.

The ocean does not recognize human boundaries.

The weather does not obey human schedules.

The geological landscape does not exist for human convenience.

This decentering of human power is an important element of postanthropocentric thinking. Humanity is powerful, but it is not omnipotent.

9. *Thoreau's Journals and the Decentering of the Human Observer*

Thoreau's journals provide perhaps the strongest evidence for his movement beyond human-centered thinking.

He recorded observations of nature with extraordinary regularity. His interest extended to minute changes in vegetation, bird migration, flowering times, weather, ice, water levels, insects, and animal behavior.

This sustained observation changes the structure of literary attention.

In conventional human-centered literature, nature may function primarily as a setting for human events.

In Thoreau's journals, the relationship is often reversed.

Human life becomes one event within a much larger sequence of natural events.

A bird's migration can become as significant as a human social activity.

The opening of a flower can deserve careful attention.

The freezing and melting of a pond can become a major event.

A change in the weather can structure the narrative.

In this sense, Thoreau's journals participate in what contemporary environmental humanities might call a decentering of the human.

Joel Porte observes that Thoreau's natural-history writing radically situated him within nature and connected him closely with the environment; for Thoreau, natural history became almost a form of autobiography.

This is a remarkable idea. If natural history becomes autobiography, then the story of the human self cannot be separated from the story of the natural world.

10. *Nature as an Agent Rather Than a Background*

Another important postanthropocentric feature of Thoreau's writing is the way nature functions as an active force.

Nature does not simply surround the human being.

It acts upon him.

It changes him.

It surprises him.

It teaches him.

It limits him.

It sometimes frightens him.

The natural world therefore possesses a kind of agency within Thoreau's texts.

This does not mean that Thoreau literally attributes human consciousness to trees, rivers, or animals. Rather, he refuses to portray them as completely passive objects.

The distinction is important.

A purely anthropocentric narrative might portray a forest as a place where a human protagonist experiences something.

Thoreau often makes the forest itself part of the experience.

The environment is not simply the stage.

It is part of the event.

This literary structure is particularly compatible with contemporary posthumanist and postanthropocentric approaches, which emphasize relationships among humans, animals, objects, environments, and material forces.

11. The Spiritual Dimension of Postanthropocentrism

Thoreau's transcendentalism also contributes to his challenge to anthropocentrism.

For Thoreau, nature is not merely a collection of physical objects. It has spiritual significance.

Walden Pond becomes a site of contemplation and revelation. Nature allows the individual to experience something greater than ordinary social existence. John Gatta's study of Thoreau's spirituality argues that Walden functions as a sacred place in Thoreau's imagination and that wildness is connected with the experience of the sacred.

This spiritual dimension further weakens human exceptionalism.

If the divine or sacred can be encountered throughout nature, then human beings cannot claim an exclusive relationship with transcendence.

The sacred is not confined to churches, human institutions, or human consciousness.

It can be found in forests, ponds, animals, seasons, geological formations, and the processes of life.

Recent scholarship continues to emphasize this aspect of Thoreau. A 2026 study of his theology of wildness describes his project as one in which divinity is present in "every person and in every molecule of creation."

Thus, Thoreau's spiritual vision provides another route beyond anthropocentrism: the sacred world is larger than the human world.

12. The Limits of Thoreau's Postanthropocentrism

Despite all these similarities, it would be inaccurate to describe Thoreau as completely postanthropocentric.

The principal difficulty is that Thoreau repeatedly evaluates nature according to what it does for human beings.

Nature makes us spiritually healthier.

It liberates us from social conformity.

It gives us wisdom.

It helps us recover our individuality.

It improves our character.

In this respect, the human being remains a central concern.

Matzke's analysis is particularly useful here. He argues that Thoreau's understanding of humans as part of nature is philosophically important, but also acknowledges that the environmental argument emerging from it is "quite human-centered."

This apparent contradiction should not be regarded as a failure.

Rather, it reveals the historical importance of Thoreau.

He stands at a transitional point between two ways of thinking.

The older view says:

Nature exists for humanity.

Thoreau increasingly suggests:

Humanity exists within nature.

But he does not completely arrive at the later postanthropocentric position:

Humanity is one participant among many in a complex more-than-human world whose value cannot be reduced to human purposes.

His thought moves toward this position without fully articulating it.

13. Thoreau as a Precursor to Postanthropocentrism

For this reason, the most defensible academic formulation is that Thoreau is a precursor to postanthropocentric thought.

He anticipates several ideas that later become central to postanthropocentric and posthumanist theory:

13.1. The Rejection of Human Exceptionalism

Thoreau questions the idea that humans are fundamentally separate from the rest of nature.

13.2. The Rejection of the Human/Nature Binary

Humans are not simply observers standing outside nature; they are "part and parcel" of it.

13.3. Recognition of Nonhuman Significance

Animals, plants, landscapes, seasons, and natural processes receive attention that exceeds their usefulness to human beings.

13.4. Recognition of Human Vulnerability

Wilderness, weather, oceans, geological processes, and animals demonstrate the limits of human control.

13.5. Ecological Relationality

Human identity emerges through relationships with the surrounding environment rather than independently of it.

13.6. Decentering the Human Subject

Thoreau's natural-history writing frequently makes the nonhuman world the primary object of attention.

13.7. Criticism of Domination

He challenges the economic and cultural practices through which civilization attempts to convert nature into property and resources.

These characteristics explain why Thoreau continues to be important for contemporary environmental philosophy.

14. From Ecocentrism to Postanthropocentrism

It is useful to distinguish between ecocentrism and postanthropocentrism when interpreting Thoreau.

Ecocentrism emphasizes the value of ecological wholes, communities, and natural systems. Some scholarship explicitly identifies an "ecocentric shift" in Thoreau's thinking, particularly during and after his Walden period.

Postanthropocentrism goes a step further by questioning the conceptual hierarchy that places humans above nonhumans.

Thoreau's work contains elements of both.

His concern with forests, ponds, ecosystems, and wildness can be interpreted ecocentrically.

His insistence that humans are part of nature and his attention to the lives of nonhuman beings can be interpreted in postanthropocentric terms.

The two approaches therefore overlap in his writing.

However, the term "postanthropocentrism" can help us see something particularly important: Thoreau is not merely saying that humans should protect nature. He is questioning the worldview that makes humans imagine themselves as fundamentally separate from it.

That is a much deeper transformation.

15. Contemporary Relevance

Thoreau's ideas have acquired renewed significance in the context of the contemporary ecological crisis.

Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, habitat destruction, and species extinction have demonstrated the consequences of treating the natural world primarily as a collection of human resources.

Thoreau's writings challenge the mentality underlying such practices.

His insistence on limits, simplicity, wildness, ecological attention, and human embeddedness offers an alternative to unlimited consumption and domination.

His relevance is also philosophical. Contemporary environmental problems require us to reconsider what it means to be human. If humans are understood as completely independent from nature, ecological destruction can appear as something external to human identity. But if humans are understood as embedded within ecological systems, environmental destruction becomes simultaneously a transformation of human life itself.

Thoreau's idea that humans are "part and parcel of Nature" therefore acquires new significance in the age of ecological crisis.

Conclusion. Henry David Thoreau cannot accurately be described as a postanthropocentric thinker in the strict contemporary theoretical sense. The concept developed long after his death, and his writings retain a strong concern with human freedom, moral development, spiritual fulfillment, and human flourishing.

Nevertheless, his works contain many of the intellectual movements that later make postanthropocentric thought possible.

In Walden, Thoreau challenges materialism and the commodification of nature. In "Walking," he explicitly describes human beings as inhabitants and parts of nature rather than simply members of human society. In The Maine Woods, he encounters a wilderness that exceeds human control and resists human expectations. In Cape Cod, natural forces expose human vulnerability. In his journals, animals, plants, weather, seasons, and ecological processes receive sustained attention and become central elements of his understanding of existence.

The deepest significance of Thoreau's environmental philosophy lies in his attempt to decenter the human without denying the human.

He does not ask us to cease being human. Instead, he asks us to understand humanity differently.

The human being is not the master of nature.

The human being is not outside nature.

The human being is not the measure of all existence.

The human being is within nature, dependent upon it, shaped by it, and participating in a larger world.

This is why Thoreau can be understood as an important precursor to postanthropocentrism. His writing begins with the question of how a human being should live, but the answer ultimately requires a transformation in our understanding of what a human being is. The individual who enters the woods in search of himself discovers that the self cannot be fully understood apart from the nonhuman world.

In this sense, Thoreau's most radical contribution is not simply his defense of wilderness. It is his challenge to the boundary separating "us" from "nature."

His work suggests that the future of humanity depends not on becoming masters of the natural world but on recognizing ourselves as participants in a larger community of life.

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