

# **Civilization Will Stunt Your Growth**

**Defending Primitivism from Accusations of Ableism**

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## Introduction

Anarcho-primitivism is frequently described by its critics as being incapable of providing sufficient accommodation for people with disabilities; it purportedly “requires a non-disabled body for its ideal society” and is thus viewed as an inherently ableist position (Ben-Moshe, Nocella, & Withers, 2012, 216).

I will argue, on the contrary, that anarcho-primitivism advocates a society that would provide for the fullest flourishing for people with a diverse range of abilities and that civilization itself acts as a disabling force. It is civilization that effectively stunts our growth and renders many of us disabled; it is civilization that narrows the range of our senses, shrinks our world and our horizons, and denies us the opportunity to experience the full use of our bodies.

The standardization of mass society necessarily defines an increasing number of people as “disabled” if they do not fit a narrowly prescribed form. The “normal range” of human variation is being shrunk and those outside of this range are stigmatized, pathologized, medicated, and manipulated. The civilized solution to living with people of different abilities is to treat large segments of people like broken clocks in need of new parts or regular servicing. This approach is in accordance with the standard operating procedure of civilization to understand every human problem as a technical problem; it allows us to discharge our responsibility to care for those around us by developing new products, offering new services, and building new infrastructure.

The need for relationships is erased. In this way, civilization allows us *not* to care for others who may need assistance, which is to say, it allows others not to care for us when we need assistance. The civilized solution to accommodating people with a diverse range of abilities is worse than the perceived problem. The solution is runaway technological escalation with a trajectory that is currently rushing toward transhumanism. It is a hatred and a disgust not strictly for disabled bodies but for physical bodies as such.

## The Accusations of Ableism

Anthony Nocella has the first and the last word in *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation: The Rise of the Eco-Ability Movement*, a book he co-edited with Judy K.C. Bentley and Janet M. Duncan. In the Introduction to the book, Nocella claims that “green anarchists view people with disabilities as a liability to a self-sustaining community” (Nocella, Bentley, & Duncan 2012, xvi). And in his concluding chapter, Nocella says that “green anarchists and primitivists argue that those who have disabilities, identified as the weak of society, will die off because of their lack of ability to survive in nature independent of technology and other people.” He claims that “green anarchists are advocating for a survival-of-the-fittest approach” and that “[t]hey promote a society that would fail to meet the needs of people with disabilities.” (Nocella 2012, 245).

A.J. Withers, probably the most vehement voice in *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation*, has said that “disabled people are incompatible with the primitivist ideal,” that “anarcho-primitivism is fundamentally disableist,” and that “this oppressive ideology cannot be reconciled with notions of social justice” (Withers 2012, 121). Reaching a crescendo, Withers warns: “The primitivist ideal is one where disabled people have been killed...We need to be eliminated in order to create their Utopia” (Withers 2012, 120).

The ableism charge of Nocella and Withers is a variation on a theme. It is a filled-in-version of a vitriolic charge made by the likes of Noam Chomsky and Murray Bookchin that anarcho-primitivists are genocidal either in intent or practice. Chomsky has said of anarcho-primitivists that “what they are calling for is the greatest mass genocide in human history.”

## **Dulled Senses, Diminished Bodies**

Ecophilosopher David Abram has asserted that “[a]part from eating and breathing, the senses are our most intimate link to the living land” (Abram 1997) and warns of a “civilized distrust of the senses” (Abram 1988). Either through the atrophy that comes with neglect or the everyday injury that is nearly unavoidable in civilized society, the full range of human ability has been truncated and our senses diminished; abilities that were commonplace are now exceptional or even altogether absent. It is nearly impossible to escape civilization unscathed; civilization itself disablizes.

*Consider vision:* myopia (or nearsightedness) has been found to occur at rates ranging between 0% and 3% in hunter-gatherer populations with most instances being fairly mild. More severe cases may be limited to one in one thousand. But “when normal environmental conditions associated with modern civilization are introduced into the hunter gatherer lifestyle,” rates of myopia can rapidly swell to levels on par with western populations within a single generation (Cordain, 2002). For a comparison, in 2010 the National Eye Institute reported a rate of myopia in the United States of 23 percent and anticipates that it will continue to rise for the foreseeable future. This has been partially attributed to excessive “near work” (things like reading, screen time); our horizons have narrowed from looking out across savannas to straining to read illuminated screens.

Researchers in Australia recently discovered that “screen time has a potential adverse influence on retinal microvascular structure” (Gopinath, et al. 2011, 1233). While it has been well-known that sedentary behavior and screen time is associated with cardiovascular disease, the Sydney researchers found that such behavior negatively affects even the microvasculature of the eye and therefore may result in impaired vision. Interestingly, children who spent more time outdoors showed less narrowing of the retinal arterioles. But physical activity alone reportedly does not fully account for this finding as engaging in indoor sports did not provide the same benefit as outdoor activity.

Not only have our lifestyles and our eyes changed but the surrounding environment has as well: “only 40% of Americans live where it becomes sufficiently dark at night for the human eye to make a complete transition from cone to rod vision” (Longcore, T. & Rich, C., 2004, 192). That means, for many of us, our eyes are only operating within an artificially narrow range; this is akin to not being able to fully extend one’s limbs.

*Consider mobility:* In *Energy and Equity*, Ivan Illich has explained how the modern traveler has been “deprived of the use of his feet” meaning that walking is often no longer a feasible option; planes, trains, and automobiles have scattered people across vast distances and have erected physical barriers in the way of the pedestrian (Illich 1974, 48). Illich is concerned with loss of opportunity to use one’s feet and how technological development has made feet inadequate, whereas anthropologist Tim Ingold explains how footwear physically alters the feet in ways that diminish ability. He states that “the human foot, with its relatively immobile big toe, has all

but lost its original prehensile function” (Ingold 2004, 317). In contrast, the more often bare feet of indigenous peoples are said to “pick over the ground with an almost manipulative precision” (Ingold 2004, 334).

One important point made by disability rights activists is that disability is not strictly defined by the presence of bodily impairment. Rather, disability is often imposed on individuals by society. Mass society is necessarily standardized society where the normal range of human variation is artificially narrowed.

This pathologizing of natural human variation is evident in the recent controversy surrounding the recently released DSM-5. Critics argue that DSM-5 “will worsen diagnostic inflation, increase inappropriate treatment, create stigma, and cause confusion among clinicians and the public” (Frances, 2005). The DSM largely exists to attach labels to people, to classify and categorize, and with each new version, what passes for “normal” or even “healthy” shrinks. People in ever greater numbers are steered toward treatment.

But there is a certain arbitrariness as to what qualifies as normal. This is one of more important contributions made by disability rights activists. Even an emotionally charged diagnosis such as schizophrenia and the lived experience of hearing voices need not be understood as pathological or as requiring professional treatment. Oryx Cohen has pointed out that symptoms associated with psychosis are experienced by approximately 1 in 10 people over the course of a lifetime and that this is roughly on par with rates of left-handedness. Cohen has argued that it is often the very act of labeling experiences such as hearing voices as symptoms, as pathological, and as evidence of a disease that is at least partially what makes such experiences dangerous; people are convinced by those in positions of authority that something is deeply wrong with them (Levine, 2013).

Lacking these professional classes and these diagnostic categories becomes a strength for those living outside of civilization. One cannot simply be dismissed as schizophrenic or as sick or as crazy but rather must necessarily be treated as an individual; furthermore this isn’t “treatment” in the professional sense of the word but rather care from one’s peers.

## **Personal Identity: Identity Politics**

While I present the above in defense of anarcho-primitivism and to suggest that it offers the greatest prospect of a society that makes possible the fullest flourishing, it is likely that it will not assuage the critics. Indeed, it runs the risk of provoking greater condemnation. The difficulty with the previous section for those within the newly emerging eco-ability field and for at least some disability rights activists is that it portrays disability as generally negative and as something to be avoided if possible. To portray any form of disability as negative is to seemingly set oneself up for accusations of ableism; it is interpreted as not wanting “those people” to exist.

The mistake being made is that such critics view eliminating (or reducing the frequency of) disability as equivalent to eliminating a particular type of person or a whole population of people. To say:

“Lower rates of disability are preferable to higher rates of disability”

is interpreted as:

“A world with fewer disabled people is preferable to a world with a greater number disabled people”

which, in turn, is taken as being morally on par with statements such as:

“A world with fewer black people is preferable to a world with a greater number of black people.”

“A world with fewer gay people is preferable to a world with a greater number of gay people.”

While the last two statements are clearly abhorrent, the first statement—the expressed desire to reduce disability rates—is not. It is a grave mistake to treat these statements functionally equivalent. A better way of understanding the first statement would be to treat it as on par with:

“A world with fewer assault victims is preferable to a world with a greater number of assault victims.”

The intention is not that assault victims need to be eliminated or that there is no place for “these people” in the world or that they need to die for anyone’s political ideal to be realized. The point is that a world with less instances of assault is to be preferred. If we can prevent assault then we ought to do that; preventing assault isn’t to be understood as preventing a particular type of person from coming into existence.

Another way to explain this is that disability should not be construed as a necessary component of one’s personal identity; rather it is contingent. To use a personal example, if Charcot-Marie-Tooth were eliminated prior to my having been born, it doesn’t mean that I would have never come into existence; it means I would have come into the world without that particular ailment. I would have been benefited not harmed.

This mistaken way of understanding disability has several very serious consequences. It’s effectively precludes taking steps to prevent various afflictions, it unfairly stigmatizes women who opt to abort afflicted fetuses, and could be reasonably extrapolated so as to oppose almost any public health measure.

## **An Obligation to Care: Division of Labor is Not Mutual Aid**

I have argued that anarcho-primitivism provides for the fullest flourishing of people with a wide range of abilities and that civilization disables people either through brute physical impairment or by artificially narrowing the range of normal human behavior. Nonetheless, this does not remove the necessity to provide and receive care. As people inevitably differ in their abilities, everyone will need assistance at some point in their lives, including when they are very young, when they are elderly, and to different degrees and in different contexts during all other life stages. As disability and/or eco-ability activists have pointed out, “disability...should be perceived as a normal state of affairs” (Ben-Moshe, Nocella, & Withers, 2012, p. 211). Normal, at least, in the sense that all lives will experience disability and all lives will involve caring for others.

We have an obligation to care for others. I hope this general statement can be widely agreed upon. It is an open question and a matter of dispute as to what this obligation requires of us and how we satisfy this obligation. The obligation to care, for example, does not necessarily trump an obligation to refrain from harming others. Our desire to care for others may be impeded if the only means available to us imposes a great cost on others. For example, I should not harvest the organs from an unwilling healthy person to care for several others. So there are limits on what steps we may take to care for people. It is the same logic that compels many to oppose animal experimentation even in instances where some benefit may result.

But critics have somehow managed to confuse civilization's division of labor with anarchism's mutual aid. For example, A.J. Withers asks: "What, then, happens to disabled people when technology and division of labor are gone? Many disabled people rely on mutual aid and forms of assistance from others...the dissolution of labor roles...would mean that many disabled people would die" (Withers 2012, 119).

Division of labor is the active deskilling of a population and, in many ways, makes mutual aid impossible. The deskilled often have little to offer outside of a highly specific context and even within that context what they can offer is often commodified rather than freely given. Doctors and therapists dispensing medications and treating schizophrenics are not engaged in mutual aid regardless of the treatment outcomes. Division of labor serves capital, whereas mutual aid serves people; they are nearly opposites. In fact, those subject to an aggressively applied division of labor could themselves be fairly described as disabled. Simon Fairlie (2012) has described himself as "dystechnic," suggesting a lack of certain skills and abilities.

There is also compelling evidence in the fossil record of the earliest humans caring for the sick and disabled in their communities. In their book *The Wisdom of the Bones*, paleoanthropologists Alan Walker and Pat Shipman describe the unearthing of *Homo erectus* remains belonging to an individual 1.7 million years ago who had a severe condition resulting in painful, debilitating blood clots. This individual would necessarily have to have been cared for by others. They would have been dependent on others to bring food and water as well as protect from other threats such as wild animals. Walker and Shipman write that "[h]er bones are a poignant testimony to the beginnings of sociality, of strong ties among individuals" (Walker & Shipman 1997, 167).

Similarly, Neanderthal specimens have been discovered that show signs of osteoarthritis. Ronald Wright argues that these "severely crippled individuals...had evidently been supported for years by their community" (Wright 2005, 20).

It should also not be overlooked that many nonhuman animals also care for their sick and disabled; Marc Bekoff has discovered that some even honor their dead. The obligation to care for others, the sick, disabled, or elderly, can and has been met outside the confines of civilization and without corresponding technological apparatus.

## **Magic Words and Promissory Notes**

Nocella, Bentley, & Duncan (2012) rightly acknowledge that "[t]he unchecked desire for technology can be a slippery slope, that can cause a destructive rippling effect" but support the use of "renewable eco-technology and non-polluting resources" (p. xvii-xviii). They seemingly consider it possible to preserve all the advantages and benefits offered by technology while dispensing with all of the negative aspects. It's a desire for perpetual motion or perhaps cold fusion or nu-

clear power's promise of energy "too cheap to meter." The "eco-" prefix is used as a magic word to rhetorically split the good from the bad; it is a promissory note suggesting that we'll somehow fix these problems in the future.

Unfortunately, the good and the bad are inherently linked and consequently represent a package deal. Anarcho-primitivists need not deny that civilization is capable of offering conveniences or that particular technologies can indeed be life-saving. But the whole project is either accepted or rejected *in toto*; it is not possible to cleanly cleave the good from the bad, the benefits from the harms. Rather, one must assess where the preponderance of consequences lie.

Nocella, Bentley, and Duncan (2012) advise that because of the environmental cost (which must be understood to include the suffering and premature death of humans and nonhumans), technology should only be used for worthwhile purposes such as advancing social justice and not for frivolous reasons. They, like so many others, presumably want to preserve medicine but dispense with mining, retain the internet but subtract Angry Birds, keep Skype but only for our conferences.

## **To Infinite and Beyond! Transhumanism**

Anarcho-primitivists are criticized for promoting a society that would not include purportedly empowering technologies such as highly sophisticated wheelchairs, elevators, and cars. The risk is runaway technological escalation. Every proposed technological advance is likely to benefit someone in some way even if the net effect is harmful toward the biotic community as a whole.

The identified benefit can then be used to suggest that the development must necessarily be pursued while the harm is placed out of sight or possibly addressed with the promissory note of fixing it later. Current projects being pursued include exo-skeletons for those unable to walk, brain-controlled artificial limbs, and ingestible computers.

The lead developer of ReWalk, a robotic exo-skeleton designed to be worn by paraplegics, has argued that such technology will soon be understood as basic care explaining: "If you've had your leg amputated above the knee, is there debate about whether you need a prosthetic? There really isn't" (Lapowsky, 2014). Likewise, he anticipates a time when the need for exo-skeletons is not a matter of discussion.

The destination of the runaway train is transhumanism. Eventually to be embodied, to be corporeal, and to be mortal will be viewed as disability. Ultimately, it may be argued that escaping our bodies altogether is necessary to overcome ableism. The only truly able-bodied will paradoxically be those who have escaped their bodies. To be an animal is to be disabled. Transhumanist Zoltan Istvan has said "we didn't evolve through billions of years to remain animals."

In that vein, Istvan (2014) has argued that failing to support research into radical life extension should be considered criminal manslaughter and has wondered when such an offense will be legally prosecuted. Istvan believes that opposing such research (or simply refusing to allocate vast sums of money toward it) is to take on the responsibility of all who die (regardless of how or when they die). Istvan and many of his transhumanist colleagues argue that it is death we must overcome. Istvan is not an aberration, his project is the logical endpoint of civilization.



## Conclusion

While anarcho-primitivism has been accused of being inherently discriminatory—indeed, even genocidal—and ableist to the core, the reality is just the opposite. Anarcho-primitivism provides for the greatest level of flourishing for people with a range of abilities. Civilization presents itself as the solution but fails to acknowledge its role in contributing to the problem. Civilization knocks people down and then sells them crutches, it takes out their feet and sells them wheels; for every person it assists, it poisons many others.

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