

## Editor's Note

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We live in the age of the Anthropocene. Yes, we do. We worry about climate change and global warming, which are expected to worsen. Catastrophes in the ecosystem loom over us. Apocalyptic discourses, including those regarding the human species, are rampant, and there are warnings that we are approaching the sixth mass extinction.

But what does it mean that we live in the age of the Anthropocene? To be sure, it refers to a human epoch: humans have grown to represent a massive geological power that impacts the Earth's ecosystem. Here, my concern is not the Anthropocene *per se*, but rather the grand time scale of our thinking that is presupposed in the use of the term. We are not accustomed to thinking on such an imposingly gigantic scale. Until recently, the unit of time in which we live has been in terms of years, centuries, millennia. If time stretches beyond the unit of millennia, it begins to lose reality; it becomes nothing but a mathematical number. We experience the passage of time not on a geological basis, but based on everyday life. The fact that our life expectancy is about 70 years has enormous significance. When Dante begins *the Divine Comedy*, narrating that he has "journeyed half of our life's way," we know immediately how old he is without needing to make mental calculations. It is not mathematical but commonsensical. However, the time scale of the Anthropocene is not commonsensical, not belonging to the life world.

We must emphasize that the Anthropocene does not belong to the life world. Here, I have borrowed the term life world from Edmund Husserl, who defined it as "a horizontal backdrop for our experiences." We experience things not in

empty space or in abstraction, but in the concrete life world that is familiar to us. The life world is the world whose certainty we take for granted, without asking for proof. If there were no such life world, we could not live even a single day. How do we know that we can buy and eat hamburgers at McDonald without first testing whether or not they are poisoned? How do we know that the sky will not crumble down? Merleau-Ponty said that our "perception is entirely sustained by the certainty of the world." Here, the curtain is not something to be proven or demonstrated. We believe. Because others believe. What I am saying here is that the Anthropocene deprives us of such certainty of the world. It takes us from ordinary life and throws us into a strange and unfamiliar world, into a geological earth, thus forcing us to think from the depth of the Earth's strata. Indeed, earth scientists dig deeply into sedimented layers of the Earth to discover the timing and relationships of events. For example, the strata of the Jurassic period indicates that Earth was once populated by dinosaurs, whose fossils we can see in museums. It is ironic that dinosaurs prove their existence to humans through their fossilized remains.

The fact that we live in the age of the Anthropocene means that we are forced to think in two incompatible time scales. Suppose one scale concerns our life span whereas the other concerns geological time. One pertains to the life world and the other pertains to the fossil earth (indicating that there had once been life). Protagoras' maxim, that man is the measure of things, is only valid for the life world. When we turn to the geological time scale, we find ourselves confronted by non-human life forms that were there long before the arrival of homo sapiens on the Earth. If contrasted with this geological time scale reaching back 4.5 billion years ago, our time span appears almost nil. In terms of human time, we are everything, but we are nothing when placed into the matrix of the geological time scale. The lesson that the Anthropocene teaches us is that we have to learn how to be everything and nothing at the same time.

Alexander Pope, in *Essay on Man*, warned us against human hubris, advising that "The proper study of mankind is man." He was one of the happy men who were satisfied with his ontological middle station in the chain of beings. He did not complain about not having omnipresent knowledge, as he believed that his knowledge—though small—was sufficient for a happy life. To want omnipresence and omnipotence is arrogance, which is the shortest road to failure. I think that Pope is right only if the universe is in order and all goes

well. Hamlet complained that "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right." However, with hindsight it seems that Hamlet's problem was not as frustrating as ours; the object he had to fix was kingship, not the Earth, like us. The king's palace is manageable, but the Earth is too big to even look at, much less manage.

Here arises the problem of proper perspective. If we want to see things clear and distinctly, we need a perspective that is neither too near nor too far away. Otherwise, we lose sight of things. One might think that we should approach an object as near as possible to see it better. However, in doing so, we see only a tiny part of the object. The other extreme is not desirable, either: If we take too much distance from the thing, it begins to disappear. Ultimately, a loss of perspective equals failure of the object. Such a loss of perspective is what this age of the Anthropocene imposes on us.

- Perspective pertains not only to space but also to time. Pascal said in *Pensee* that "When we read too fast or too slowly, we understand nothing." This is the case in the Anthropocene. Compared to a mayfly's life, our human life is almost infinite. But it is short when compared to trees, which live thousands of years. How about the speed of time? Isn't it that one hour for a mayfly equals one year for a human? Isn't the rock, whose immobility and inertness we take for granted, active as an animal? Daniel Dennett introduced the term time chauvinism to refer to the human inability to understand time as too slow or too fast or too long or too short. If we record a rock with a video camera and play it as quickly as 1 million times, we will discover that it moves and changes its body shape. We can do the same to the lives of humans; we are born, grow old, and die within one hour. Ephemeral. If we take a non-human time scale, we will discover that the boundary between organic and inorganic disappears. Our lifeworld is not sustainable if we shift our time scale.

- What will happen to the concept of homo sapiens if we take a non-human perspective? We experience things from the vantage point of human subjectivity, that is, thinking of ourselves as the center of the world. It is "I" that sees a cat and knows it as a cat. This simple act of cognition would not be possible if there were no certainty of the life world, which allows us to distinguish a cat from other animals. However, we sometimes intuit that the cat also sees and knows us in its feline way. Its way of experiencing us is not as predominantly visual as our human way of doing the same. Then, there is the reversal of subject and object position: the cat sees us, and we are seen. The cat does not

see us as homo sapiens, nor does it see us in a way that we want it to see us. Think about how an x-ray image sees us. It exposes only bones; the flesh does not exist. Then, how about when undergoing a gastroscopy? We are the stomach wall and its tissue and cells. Is there any trace of the subject 'I' in those cells? We lose our bodily integrity if there is any.

It is paradoxical that the Anthropocene, though indicating the human epoch, announces the end of humanism, inviting us into the non-human world and non-human perspectives. We are now experiencing the effects of the unintended consequences; humans intended to recreate the raw earth into a safer and more affluent dwelling place but ended up destroying the very foundation of our life. Such a disjunction was due to the human exceptionalism that did not take non-humans as coevolutionary partners of humans, thereby exploiting them as resources for satisfying human needs and desires. Along with many non-human members of the earth, we are all earthlings, all with equal rights for survival. Our old habit of experiencing the world exclusively from our human perspectives proves to be fatal. We have to learn how to think about things from non-human perspectives, and how to replace anthropocentrism with ecocentrism. There is an old Chinese story about a man who cannot sleep at night, afraid that heaven might fall. How unreasonable it is to have such worry about events that will never happen. It is a form of madness, compulsive anxiety to say the least. However, we, living in the crisis of climate changes, cannot laugh him off. The destruction of the ozone layer is a reality. Nothing can be more reasonable than our worry about the increase in UV radiation cause by ozone depletion that threatens life on Earth. The certainty of the life world, which Husserl took for granted, is not with us anymore.

It is becoming more and more apparent that everything, both human and non-human, is related to and depends on each other for their survival. Life on Earth is the symbiotic choreography of world-making. No individual entity, mind, or matter exists without and before such earthly relations and interactions. All beings seek to sustain their existence as mindfully and intelligently as humans, though in different ways. We know that Thomas Nagel asked if it is possible to feel "like to be a bat," with the ready-made answer being that it is impossible. However, I am sure that we know what it is like to be a bat. Humans are like bats as much as bats are like humans. The poet Aldo Leopold asked us to learn

to think like a mountain. We take his aphorism literally, not as a metaphor. “We are mountain as well as a bat”—this is geologically true.