

IN PRAISE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Abstract

The Anthropocene is the contemporary version of Utopianism, of which it shares the illusions, albeit noble, and deceptions. In other words, it is what took the place of revolutionary hope in the last century, and it is with this eye that, in my opinion, we must look at it. Abandoning the workers, it became the defence of animals, then of plants, and now of the planet. In all this, we do not consider the robust anthropocentrism that pushes us to the fatal confusion between the salvation of the planet (indifferent to humanity and its manners) and the salvation of humanity, which is instead strictly dependent not on saving the planet, but on maintaining an environment where humanity can survive.

Keywords: Progress, Ecology, Responsibility, Humankind, Life.

One way to argue that humankind is progressing and to make this thesis penitential (therefore politically acceptable) is to declare that, for some time now (even though, as we will see, this point is problematic) we have entered the Anthropocene.

The endless ages that precede us have picturesque names that fascinate young and old alike. For example, the Cenozoic, 65 million years old, the Mesozoic, which began 251 million years ago, and the Palaeozoic, which began 542 million years ago. The recurring “zoic” suffix is a signal that deserves reflection: we study the epochs of the earth by marking them with epochs of *life* on earth. And this is far from obvious, since there is no mention anywhere that the task of the earth consists in hosting forms of life, or that the organic is superior to the inorganic. It is easy to see the anthropocentric design of this division, which works by marking increasingly complex life-forms up to the most complex one, that is, the human race. Then, once the dinosaurs and other childhood dreams or ghosts have disappeared, comes the list of hominids, also defined according to their supposed intelligence, with the peak being again us – the *sapiens sapiens*.

Here we have a problem, of course. As there aren't too many ostensible proofs of the *sapiens sapiens*' intelligence, we resort to time frames defined by the materials they used to make their tools: stone (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic), copper, bronze, iron... So the unit of measurement of all these epochs is made up of two axiological principles: the organic as superior to the inorganic, and the human as the ultimate organism, because it is capable of producing artefacts. From our point of view, I do not think this is a wrong choice at all. One wonders why we should introduce other ways to measure time (say, the number of volcanic eruptions or environmental devastation caused by meteorites). But if we agree on this point, then we must admit that the concept of "Anthropocene" is problematic to say the least.

Disputes about its dating are a sign of this difficulty. When did the Anthropocene start? The oscillation, and therefore the approximation, is of several tens of millennia, from the Flintstones to the day before yesterday. Some say it began about 40,000 years ago, when humans started to exterminate the great animals that had preceded them. Some say that it began when, through breeding and agriculture, humans literally changed the face of the earth. For some, the threshold is even closer to today. In this group, some place the beginning of the Anthropocene with the geographical discoveries that, by another convention, would mark the beginning of the modern age. Others, with a prevailing aesthetic sense, believe that the Anthropocene began with the industrial age (so that, as with cholesterol, there would be two Anthropocene, the good one, the age of the *Eclogues*, and the bad one, the age of *Oliver Twist*). Finally, some others, relying on the sure marker of radioactivity, make the Anthropocene coincide with the atomic bomb. This, however, is a contradiction that is difficult to let go of, because on the one hand the Anthropocene is "the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment".¹ On the other, the Anthropocene would begin at the very moment when, for the first time in the history of the world, there were the premises for the *disappearance* of human action as a result of a nuclear catastrophe.

All these circumstances lead us to the heart of the fundamental contradiction embedded in the concept of "Anthropocene", which is badly formed as such (after all, as we know, it was born by chance and almost as a joke thanks to the Nobel prize winner for chemistry Paul Crutzen, just as the Big Bang was at first a derogatory term for a dark and confusing theory). What's more, it is a very easy way to unburden one's conscience while letting things be exactly as they were before (the *Leopard docet*, here and elsewhere).

1 *Oxford dictionary*, ad vocem.

On the one hand, and this is the biggest incongruity, a concept that is entirely built on a positive and anthropocentric philosophy of history (the centrality of life, then of human life, and then of the technologies developed by humans) is simply twisted in its meaning, and transformed into a looming catastrophe. And this catastrophe, mind, is not only about humanity (in which case the concept of Anthropocene would preserve some coherence) but also about the environment, which couldn't care less about what happens to us – so much so that it is ready to become fully unlivable for us and very liveable for other forms of life, or even unlivable for all organisms in general. I confess that the very complex or very simple forms of life that may or may not follow the disappearance of humanity do not interest me at all. Like many others, I am interested in humankind and its fate, and generally speaking, I am mostly interested in what may happen to us in a relatively short space-time span.

Many factors play a role in the reference to the Anthropocene, first of all secularisation. No longer being able to kneel before an omnipotent God and creator of heaven and earth (indeed, having itself become, by self-proclamation, that God), humankind is essentially touching wood. Above all, since it has evolved and left behind (thanks to anthropocentric and Anthropocenic progress) things like incest, anthropophagy and human sacrifices, it can (and must) try to soothe the fate of the underprivileged. From this point of view, decolonisation has been a much more advantageous process than deindustrialisation, since it has undoubtedly impoverished the colonial countries (which were not many) while stratospherically improving the living standards in countries like India and China which, with their three billion inhabitants, make up almost half the world's population.

Deindustrialisation in the West has left the most charitable people without workers to feel sorry for (but in fact those workers were still better off than their grandparents, just as they are today in India and China), so the focus has shifted first to animals, which have become the new workers, and then to plants. One might soon expect movements in favour of viruses and bacteria, which are undoubtedly elements of biodiversity – which, contrary to the assumptions of the Anthropocenists, is not shrinking at all, but rather spreading wildly. To object that viruses are not really life-forms would expose one to a clear accusation of biocentrism, and from there, going back up, of anthropocentrism, so I would not recommend going down that path.

Allow me a straightforward but hopefully useful consideration. Anthropocene, like Capital, is a good word for sermons in which, exempting ourselves from any invention or solution, we only lament the (true or presumed) evils of the world. In both cases, an indeterminate and indefinable

entity is blamed for all evil, which, by a magical transitive property, makes those who complain about it into saints and bearers of good – even if in fact they continue to live exactly as all the other Anthropocenic, capitalist people. It is ancient history. God’s death did not prevent theologians from developing an ad hoc theology, but surely things were easier when God was the lord and master of the universe. So when Capital and the Anthropocene took his place, it was better to hold on to them.

Is there an alternative? Of course there is, and it is on this point that I would like to focus my apology of the Anthropocene. Rather than criticising easy, non-existent, and above all inconclusive targets (does it make sense to hold an international conference on the Anthropocene and the evils of capital instead of committing suicide, which would be the more coherent choice?), why not try a reversal of perspective – what my elders used to call “deconstruction”? The supposed ruler of the universe is, as we know, a particularly disadvantaged animal, which to remedy its shortcomings has developed a series of technical supplements that did much more than destroy the environment. They have allowed for the flourishing of humankind, the refinement of customs, and all that is called the “world of the spirit” (including the Anthropocene). This came at some cost to the environment, as has been obvious for tens of thousands of years. However, it has been anything but a failure, as demonstrated by the dizzying growth of the human population (those who find this growth negative in itself should go ahead and draw up protocols for a final solution; I’d rather not, and fortunately I believe I am in good company). In a nutshell, my argument consists of three points.

First. The concern about the Anthropocene is in itself a symbol of humanity’s progress. Therefore, while the concept is foolish and badly formed, the state of humanity to which it refers is that of progress, of a journey, so to speak, towards the city of God. Let us take note: Greta Thunberg was born in a rich country. Her great-great-grandfathers, under Charles XII, did not hesitate to wage heavy imperialist wars and devastate half of Europe. Then they stopped, became neutral, developed a Welfare, and it was in these conditions that sensitivity for the environment could develop – a sentiment that is inconceivable in other countries where people are struggling with urgent and dramatic social problems concerning the existence of humans. Not to consider this circumstance would reveal a lack of historical and philosophical sense. It would be like condemning the imperialist war of the British against the Zulus, while however pointing out that the latter had a deplorable aesthetic inclination to wear leopard fur.

A dozen years ago, a photo went viral on Facebook: it was visited two million times and received 200,000 likes. It was the picture of a man who dives into Lake Superior every day with his 19-year-old dog to cure his arthritis. That owner (because that's what we call someone who has a dog, which is not the case, for example, with a friend or relative), despite being loving and dedicated, would not necessarily be willing to grant a right of citizenship to his dog. And yet this is the proposal put forward about ten years ago in a book that has made people talk.² In it, the author overcomes the embarrassing genericity that is condensed in the word "animal". Animals, in their relationship with humans, are of three types: domestic (for which citizenship must be recognised), wild (for which separate sovereignty must be recognised), and "liminal", like the coyotes that live in the canyons around Los Angeles, or the seagulls that now compete for space and food with pigeons in Rome, which must be granted a state of "denizenship" – that is, residents without citizenship in the proper sense.

Against the argument that it makes no sense to grant animals rights that they do not understand,³ one could argue that even children or demented or ignorant people do not understand their rights, which is not a good reason to deny them to them. Or else – going beyond simple retaliation – one could propose a revision of the concept of "citizenship", which consists not only in the positive exercise of rights, but also in a relationship of trust. In concrete terms, one should imagine civil defenders of animals representing the latter whenever decisions involving them are taken. Of course, even the most fervent animal-rights activist cannot help but find this idea difficult. If citizenship entails duties, as well as rights, will it be so easy to convince a lion to become a vegan and a gorilla to be politically correct? If dogs and cats are now considered family members in many homes, is there any guarantee that a poodle who has been forced to wear makeup, pink reflective hair and earring holes has the right to leave in protest? What about citizenship based on trust, for example, in a territory dominated by the Camorra?

But certainly the problem of animal citizenship forces us to rethink our own humanity. It is not certain whether Nietzsche did or did not hug a horse, but I was struck, in the autobiography of the otherwise very meek Jaspers, by the confession that the greatest regret of his childhood was not being able to kill a fox while he was hunting with his father, who was disappointed with him as a result.⁴ Which is to say that the path that leads

2 S. Donaldson and W. Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

3 R. Scruton, *Land Rights and Legitimacy*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2000.

4 K. Jaspers, *Schicksal und Wille. Autobiographische Schriften*, Piper, München 1967.

to pity towards animals is a long one, and that in particular around the seventeenth century people went backwards on this, denying them a soul and reducing them to machines (let us not forget, however, that in that same seventeenth century, and while not denying them a soul and the comfort of sacraments, human beings were often killed in gruesome ways).

In 1684 an oratorian father, Jean Darmanson, published a 93-page booklet entitled *The Beast Transformed into a Machine*.⁵ The frontispiece represented a slaughtered ox and a donkey beaten by a man, under the approving gaze of Plato and Aristotle (in a later edition the title became, more correctly, “degraded to a machine”). In it, Darmanson praised Descartes who, by transforming animals into machines, had solved the age-old theological problem of where the souls of mice and cats, elephants and amoebas would end up after death. The pious orator, obviously, did not think about animal-rights initiatives, but was driven by theological scruples: if animals had a soul, we should either envision a paradise (and hell) for cats and mice, or conclude that God is so cruel that a mouse is only ever born to be eaten by a cat. The Cartesian argument, however, backfired. Because if the complex behaviour of animals can be explained as a result of purely mechanical processes, then who can assure us that other people are not machines and, worse still, that we are not machines ourselves? This in theory is not a big deal, but in practice it opens up far from rosy prospects: for example, that of a single landfill with roasters, foxes and humans.

So, it was said that animals do not have a soul – they are machines, like alarm clocks or spring-loaded roasters. The argument was decisive: no one can call us inhumane if we throw the alarm clock against the wall (even though, for some, things are different for robots, that is, for more intelligent and autonomous machines – I do not agree on this point: only an organism can suffer). And just as there are no campaigns against the abandonment of alarm clocks and roasters, as long as they do not pollute the environment, there will be no campaigns against the abandonment of animals. On the other hand, as we know very well, these campaigns have been, are and will be, a sign of a humanisation of the human being – which does us credit, despite the Anthropocene or, more exactly, by virtue of it. To be human means to be compassionate: abandoning a dog is a sign of brutality (i.e. animality) while a dog abandoning a human is not morally censurable, not even if the dog in question is a guide dog.

5 J. M. Darmanson, *La beste transformée en machine*, Amsterdam (s. ed.) 1684; 2a ed. *La beste dégradée en machine*, l’auteur, Amsterdam 1691.

If, as has rightly been argued,⁶ animals play virtually the same role for an idealistic system as Jews do for a fascist system, the issue of animal defence is closely related to the defence of humans, whose behaviour is largely the same as that of animals.⁷ Indeed, this is the case for automatisms, i.e. those “analogues of reason” made up of memory, sedimentary experiences, and expectation of similar cases, which characterise 99% of human and animal behaviour.⁸ And it is even more so in marginal cases, so much so that forty years ago, the battle for animal rights began based on the subject of human minorities.⁹ *De te fabula narratur*: if one hundred years ago a philosopher saw nothing wrong in shooting a defenceless animal and was upset for not having killed it, it is difficult to think that humanity is getting worse. Yet this is what is implicitly assumed in the view of the Anthropocene as the final catastrophe and deserved punishment – inflicted on us no longer by God the Father but (a further sign of gender progress) by Mother Nature.

A second, decisive point is the following. It is thanks to growing material well-being and spiritual sensitivity that – unlike any previous era in human history – ecology is at the centre of the political agenda, and will remain so. This is a further sign, if even needed, that humanity is progressing and that natural intelligence continues to grow – even if in much more complex and tortuous ways than imagined by the theorists of collective intelligence and heaven on earth. On this point too, however, one must be clear. It is often argued that what we are called to do by safeguarding the environment is ensure the salvation of the planet. But one could object that the planet does not need our intervention, since the fate of the Earth is already marked: first a crash into the Sun, and then, eventually, the thermal death of the universe. It is not even a question of preserving life forms on the planet, since there are billions of non-human living beings ready to take our place, just as we have taken the place of previous life forms. It is, if anything, about trying to preserve the environment that makes the *human* life form possible. In short, let us admit this with humility. When we say “we have to save the planet” we are proclaiming a noble bravado.

6 T. W. Adorno, *Beethoven, Philosophie der Musik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, pp. 123-124.

7 J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Fordham University Press, New York 2008.

8 G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz's Monadology : a new translation*, ed. by L. Strickland, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014, § 26.

9 P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Harper Collins, New York 1975.

Think of Jonas's imperative of responsibility.¹⁰ According to its basic metaphysical axiom that "being must always prevail over non-being", the modern development of technology could make it impossible to implement the principle. One could hardly be more anthropomorphic. Even if the universe were to fall apart, it would still not be proven that non-being prevails over being. And it takes a lot of imagination to consider the melting of glaciers as a transition to non-being; after all, in nature nothing is created and nothing is destroyed. The melting of glaciers is a very serious, very critical and terrible problem which has to be fought in the name of the survival of the human species. But it does not in any way authorise us to consider "being" only what there is when there is humanity, and "not being" what there was and will be there before and after us. And if the shepherd of being is someone like Heidegger, we have further cause for concern, if we are not of pure Aryan race.

As for the Anthropocene, it seems to be another face, Lenten and contrite, of the human being's pride as colonizer and conqueror of the world, master of the universe, the being to whom God had given the task of completing his work, and who would reach the apex with modern technology. And history, once again, provides valuable lessons. The devastation of the environment is a characteristic of human history, not of the Anthropocene: Europe was once covered with forests, and ever since Neolithic times humans have been committed to deforesting it. And it is hard to imagine an environmental catastrophe worse than the one that occurred on Easter Island: in order to transport the Mohai they cut down all the trees, to the point that they could not even abandon (due to lack of boats) an island that they had made almost uninhabitable. On the positive side, think how many regulations for the protection of the environment and health exist today that did not exist in the past. Half a century ago London was full of pollution and the Thames was extremely dirty. Not anymore. Half a century ago smoking was a sign of virility and intellectuality and buildings were full of asbestos (even when it turned out to be harmful, things went on unchanged for a while). Now only those who can't quit still smoke, and everyone is discouraged from doing so, and buildings are asbestos-free. Obviously, we do this for us, and certainly not for the planet, which looks upon us (to use an anthropocentric expression) powerful and indifferent.

As for saving the Earth, God did not give us the task of saving the planet any more than he gave Adam the mandate to name the animals.¹¹ We

10 H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1984.

11 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007.

have not received any task as far as the planet is concerned, but we have immediately experienced the difficulties of surviving, feeding, sheltering and fighting with animals much stronger than us. It is precisely for this purpose that the human race has equipped itself with technology, which (it may very well be) will eventually lead to such a change in the environment that it will be impossible for our species to survive. But let's not forget that, without technology, the human being would have followed the destiny of his natural life, short, lonely and brutish, and it is very possible that our species (provided that something like that can be determined, since we do not descend from a single ape, but from many) would have become extinct hundreds of thousands of years ago. With the result that we would not be here and no one would have even ever uttered the word "human".

Now, as for saving other living beings. As humiliating as it may seem compared to the high concept that we have of ourselves, and of our powers for good and evil, from the point of view of nature (of what for us, and only for us, is "nature") this is a great time: viruses have never done so well as they do now. The hole in the ozone layer and all that we are responsible for, certainly doesn't matter to them. And there are plenty of species ready to take our place, should the environment no longer suit human life, just as we have taken the place of dinosaurs. The latter, let's remember, were doomed not because of their doing (as strong and well equipped as they were, they did not need technology), but because of a climate change that can be attributed, as is currently assumed, to the crash of a meteorite more powerful than all the atomic bombs that crowd our military arsenals today.

As for saving "nature". Here too there is a strange pride in the task we have given ourselves, which is entirely based on the difference between natural and artificial. The artificial would be all that is done by humans, and the natural would be all the rest. What megalomania. On the one hand, it is hard to see why a termite mound or a dam built by beavers would be "natural", while the same artifacts, if produced by human hands, would be "artificial". On the other hand, if we think about it for a moment, what underlies the alternative between natural and artificial is actually the alternative between natural and *supernatural*. What the human being does is allegedly the absolute other compared to nature – the hand of man is in fact the hand of God, called to work miracles by reversing the order of nature. But let's not forget that the plastic island in the Pacific is also natural, its elementary components are the remains of the dinosaurs we have replaced, and our role in the genesis of the island is infinitely inferior to that of a gardener in the Borromean Islands or of a Polder builder in Zeeland.

In this regard, perhaps it is useful to make an observation. Nature is primarily a mechanism, i.e. iteration. There is no difference between the operation of the solar system and that of a roaster. In the wider sphere of mechanisms, there is a more circumscribed sphere in which irreversible processes prevail: the sphere of organisms. Salt dissolves in water, but if you let the water evaporate you get salt again, while when a single-cell organism has split in two, you cannot go back to the original cell. The environment is a set of interruptions and iterations that can be considered as an artifact, which receives its meaning from humans. Nature has neither an end in itself, nor a value in itself, which does not mean in the least that it has no value, but that its value is formed within a responsive process.

Ecology, just like the economy, is the result of the relationship between responsiveness and the environment. There is no “environment in itself”, nor is there a nature endowed with its own purposes. This crucial circumstance is largely ignored in the reflections on the ecological crisis. Instead of naturalising technology, it is a question of recognising the technological component of nature. In this way we will stop setting the pure, i.e. nature, against the impure, i.e. technology. There is no nature as such, only an interaction between nature and culture. And this interaction is by no means exclusively destructive, but rather mainly constructive. The world in its natural state is no more sensible or benevolent than ours. It is up to us, thanks to the technology and welfare that we are capable of, to aim for something better.

Are these arguments aimed to say that global warming is a hoax? Of course not. Indeed, even if we had not been the primary cause of it (as we know, there are natural warming and cooling cycles), we have certainly lent a considerable hand to the process, and we will pay a very high price for this, especially the poorest among us. We must therefore do everything we can to ensure that our species does not disappear, to avoid carnage and misfortune, but not because we are the agents of a supreme ruler who has put the world in our hands, but because we are a weak species, which has grown and multiplied through technology, and which could die or save itself through that same technology. And all this happens under the supremely indifferent gaze of the planet, nature, and all other living beings.

It remains indisputable that the stock of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has never stopped growing (it could only do so after many years of zero net emissions). And in fact we keep eroding the so-called ‘carbon budget’, and we continued to do so even during the pandemic, albeit at a slower pace. So, the world today is less polluted than before in terms

of emissions flow, but more polluted than before in terms of stock. Well, what else could we expect? If one quits smoking, this does not remedy the damage one has already done – it reduces the damage one would undergo if one did not quit at all. And there are two things we are aware of today, two things that half a century ago were only the object of literary sensibility (for example, in the deprecation of the disappearance of romantic landscapes): the fact that smoking is bad for us, and that global warming is a serious problem.

Last but not least, a non-rhetorical reflection on the Anthropocene would allow us to shed light on humankind itself. Indeed, we would overcome the idea (in agreement with the Rousseau syndrome that still afflicts Europe), that the human being is good by nature and corrupted by technology – humans simply do not exist *before* technology. This in turn would free us from many Robinesque views (after all, Robinson's first attempts to recover a human living standard consisted in recovering technical equipment and manufacturing new tools). In line with Rousseau's precepts, Marie Antoinette had a model farm built next to the Petit Trianon, with goats, cows and so on. She would spend her best moments there, indifferent to her subjects and anticipating today's popular passion for organic and bio farming, at least for those who can afford it. It may be entirely legitimate to see this inclination towards the natural as a cunning move of the market,¹² but it may very well be a cunning move of reason, which by making the natural and organic a symbol of distinction leads to greater care for the environment. One could hardly have any doubts between buying a biological soap and a synthetic product that is frighteningly polluting, and this too is a sign of progress. But if it were specified that the organic soap is such because it is made from pure *Untermenschen* fat, only a Nazi would still go for that option, despite it being, strictly speaking, the more ecological and less anthropocenic and anthropocentric choice.

But, of course, every ideology has its zealots, madmen and mythomaniacs, and the Anthropocene is no exception. On the one hand, as said, it is the sign of human progress, as we have become sensitive to things that used to leave us indifferent, and therefore have become more humane. On the other hand, the door of paranoia is always open, and it is worth keeping in mind what Voltaire wrote in 1755 to Rousseau about his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*: "I have received, sir, your new book against the human race, and I thank you for it. [...] The horrors

12 G. Marrone, *Addio alla natura*, Einaudi, Torino 2011.

of that human society – from which in our feebleness and ignorance we expect so many consolations – have never been painted in more striking colours: no one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes: to read your book makes one long to go about all fours”. And Voltaire went on to say: “Since, however, it is now some sixty years since I gave up the practice, I feel that it is unfortunately impossible for me to resume it: I leave this natural habit to those more fit for it than are you and I”.