

# Inside the Anthropocene

*Uwe Voigt*

## ***Preview***

This paper deals with the question, what does it mean to be inside the Anthropocene? In order to answer this question in the first place one has to have a notion of what the Anthropocene is. There is a seemingly simple factual answer. Subsequently it is argued that this answer is correct, but that it is not the only one, and that the plurality of possible answers in turn is due to the circumstance that there is more than one sense of “being inside the Anthropocene.” Three senses are going to be distinguished: an ‘outer’ sense, which deals with the mentioned factual level; an ‘inner,’ which takes account of the mental side of the Anthropocene; and an ‘inmost’ sense, which is based on the assumption that, for this mental side of the Anthropocene, there is an according mind which is going to be called “hypersubject.” Admittedly, the discussion proceeding along these senses does not only proceed from work in progress, but will also become more and more speculative, hopefully in a non-toxic way, as the attempt to find out what it would look like if it were so in order as to enable and encourage the attempt to look at it as if it is so. All of this is meant to be a step towards a hermeneutics of the Anthropocene: a deeper understanding of what it means to be a subject inside the Anthropocene.

## Inside the Anthropocene

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### Introduction

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### The Outer Side: The Anthropocene as the Time of our Life

To the question, what does it mean to be inside the Anthropocene? the seemingly simple answer is: It means to be within a certain geological time, namely the geological time we are living in.<sup>2</sup> This geological time is characterized by the significant exponential increase of certain measurable values (the so-called “Golden Spikes”) starting around the year 1945; this

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<sup>1</sup> For this notion of speculation, see Uwe Meixner, *Liebe und Negativität* (Aschendorff Verlag: Münster, 2017), 12.

<sup>2</sup> For the following characterization of the Anthropocene, see Katrin Klingan, et al., eds. *Textures of the Anthropocene: Grain Vapor Ray* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

increase in turn is due to the huge global influence of one species on this planet, and this species is us. This is not to say that all members of our species are equally responsible for this situation. The economic development of the Global North and its extension into the era of globalization at least makes an essential contribution to the occurrence of the Golden Spikes. Nevertheless it can be justified to use “our species” as the namesake of the Anthropocene, not only because the people living in the Global North belong to it, but also because all other members of this species have to deal with that situation. It should be noted, however, that this does not diminish individual or collective responsibilities; it merely shows that with less responsibility for the Anthropocene does not come less of the Anthropocene itself. On the contrary, those who are less responsible for it because they have less economic power are very likely to be the ones to be hit by its consequences most fiercely.<sup>3</sup>

These consequences compare only to geological or even astronomical factors like plate tectonics, volcanism or impact events. Also the results are comparably geological, for example the production of new geological strata which could be discovered by alien researchers in a distant future; the mass extinction of species; climate change, to name a few. The scientific jury may still be out on the question whether the term “Anthropocene” should enter our school books or not, but the very phenomenon seems to be an undeniable matter of fact. According to Timothy Morton, these facts are about so-called hyperobjects:<sup>4</sup> objects which are distributed across space and time so that we do not experience these very objects but only representative instances of them; but while the hyperobjects as such are dimensionally remote from our senses their representatives are on the contrary very near, because they pervade our environment and also our bodies.

It is not by chance that the hyperobjects of the Anthropocene are too close for comfort. The facts about these objects do not face us merely from the outside. Precisely because the Anthropocene is the time in which we are living, there is no outside of the Anthropocene for us. Being inside the Anthropocene, even in this fact-related sense, is not like being in a room or container we can leave when we chose to do so. Even the most prominent ways of escape would just be continuations of the Anthropocene with other, even more potent means, as they would maintain an environment that is shaped by our influence: geoengineering; terraforming another planet or—if this should be possible after all—uploading our consciousness into a virtual reality. Everywhere we go, we take the Anthropocene, and our entanglement into its hyperobjects, with

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<sup>3</sup> For an example, see Julie-Ann Richards, and Simon Bradshaw, *Uprooted by Climate Change: Responding to the Growing Risk of Replacement* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013).

us. Moreover, having itself turned into a global impact factor which encounters us only by its individual representatives, our own species obviously also has turned into a hyperobject. We—some of us—change the face of our planet in a radical manner without having intended to do so; we—some of us—make profits out of this situation or suffer from it, and all of us are diverse representatives of a hyperobject. Therefore we cannot leave the Anthropocene and investigate it from the outside. We have to research it from within if we want to understand not only the Anthropocene, but also—and together with it—ourselves, including the mentioned differences in power, responsibility and exposure to the hyperobjects of the Anthropocene.

### **The Inner Side: The Anthropocene as an Atmosphere of Narcissism**

The exposure to the hyperobjects of the Anthropocene, however, has more than just physical consequences, radical as they in themselves already are. There are phenomena which suggest what it is like to be inside the Anthropocene, and as Thomas Nagel has taught us, if it is like something to be in certain states, these states are mental states.<sup>5</sup> Therefore there seems to be an inner, namely a mental side to the Anthropocene. There is more to the Anthropocene than meets the eye. There is also something to it which touches the soul and strikes the mind.

As we are intimately involved in our own mental states, sometimes it is opportune to approach mental states in a certain way from the outside, for example by watching behavior which indicates such states. One phenomenon that can be adduced for the inner side of the Anthropocene is the way feral animals behave in it. These animals now always live “in the action circle of the enemy,” as Jens Soentgen expresses it, because they are threatened by the firearms used by humans.<sup>6</sup> This does not only intimidate individual animals, but fills whole landscapes with an atmosphere of fear, which is communicated between species and from generation to generation. This reveals the kind of mental states we have to deal with in the Anthropocene: in the phenomenological terminology founded by Martin Heidegger and developed by Hermann Schmitz, these states are referred to by the German word “Stimmungen,” which subsequently will be translated as “moods,” keeping in mind the connotations of “being-tuned-in” and “harmony.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, phenomenologists themselves would deny that moods are mental states,

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What it is Like to be a Bat,” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974), 435-450.

<sup>6</sup> Jens Soentgen, “Im Funktionskreis des Feindes: Über die Angst der Tiere im Anthropozän” *Merkur* 71, no. 814 (March 2017), 18-30.

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Bude, *Das Gefühl der Welt: Über die Macht von Stimmungen* (Berlin: Hanser, 2016).

because moods cut across the subject-object-distinction which seems to be presupposed when talking of mental states which, in turn, seem to be private state of a subject. But moods satisfy the minimal definition of a mental state prevailing in analytic philosophy according to Nagel: It is likesomething to be in them. And the example of the “ecology of fear”, as Soentgen aptly puts it,<sup>8</sup> shows how the phenomenological and analytical approach can be combined: Moods are certain states of a subject belonging to a comprehensive whole (in this case, a biotope): namely those states in which to be is like something for the subject. Here the biological benefit of moods reveals itself: Through them, the subject feels what it is like (in a given situation) to be a part of the comprehensive whole. This enables the subject to know how that whole is doing, what is going on around the subject, without requiring complex languages or the entertaining of propositions. This makes it plausible that we share this “moody” kind of knowledge with animals.

Are there “Anthropocenic” moods which display themselves also in human behavior? A point in favor of assuming this can be made with regard to the way the mentioned facts about the Anthropocene are dealt with. Here two trends can be seen: aggressive denial and aggressive acceptance. To start with denial: The empirical data in favor of these facts are massive, and yet those facts and sometimes even the corresponding data are either declared as irrelevant or even as “fake”. Solid scientific evidence is done away with in an unprecedented extent and intensity.<sup>9</sup> Why this is so can be explained by Giambattista Vico’s famous equating of fact as “what is done”) and truth:<sup>10</sup> If what is done and what is true coincide, then the truth of our species in the Anthropocene consists in what it has done, which turns us into a concluded fact: something that has been done and keeps being done to the earth, and we have good reasons to fear this truth, which is us. We have good reasons to fear that we are done, because what we are doing keeps undoing the foundations of our life on this planet. One way to deal with this fear is precisely the mentioned aggressive denial, turning away from what is fearful, trying to replace the facts by alternative facts in order to keep us from coming undone, with the consequence that we keep doing what we have been doing all along. Another way of coping is aggressive acceptance: accepting the facts and trying to change them within the very context that has brought them about, for example by declaring new policies and new ways of management for our planet in order to stop the global changes or at least to keep them

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. id., *Ökologie der Angst* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Jens Soentgen, and Helena Bilandzic, “Die Struktur klimaskeptischer Argumente. Verschwörungstheorie als Wissenschaftskritik,” *GALA* 23, no. 1 (2014), 40-47.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Costelloe, “Giambattista Vico,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward Zalta, ed., <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/vico/>>.

within certain limits. Of course, this does not mean to end the impact of our species on earth, but just to try and control that impact, leading, as argued above, not out of the Anthropocene, but just deeper into it. Different as these attitudes may appear, they have one and the same origin: a mood swinging between despair and megalomania, swinging around the repressed insight that the time of the Anthropocene is the future perfect, which ironically refers to a future devoid of all perfections: We will have been. What is repressed here returns as post-apocalyptic motives prevailing in the contemporary entertainment culture, depicting the mess we will have left behind for few, rather unlucky survivors.<sup>11</sup>

What mood is it that makes us react to it in these ways? There is an umbrella-term for it: narcissism.<sup>12</sup> As a mental state, narcissism means that for a subject it is like something to be that very subject—empty, void, unfulfilled. In the Anthropocene, we as a species are like that when and if being us is just like being another geological force, another extinction event. This is what we are as we are involved in the hyperobjects of the Anthropocene by the various economic, social, political, cultural networks which we have constructed and which are supporting us. These networks do not merely coexist, but intertwine into a self-sustaining “technosphere” which amplifies the human impact on the earth.<sup>13</sup> Also the mentioned “ecology of fear” fits into this picture: Narcissism makes the subjects affected by it produce an atmosphere of fear around them, as this helps to hedge and conceal their own felt inner emptiness. So the Anthropocene is pervaded by a narcissist mood which, in turn, strengthens and empowers the Anthropocene: a classical vicious circle.

### **The Inmost Side: The Anthropocene as the Age of the Hypersubject**

It just has been argued that the Anthropocene has a mental side to it and that we are inside this mental side, namely in certain moods. So the Anthropocene is not only a geological age, but also an age of subjectivity. This may come as a surprise, because the evanescence of subjectivity has long been preached, in analytic as well as in continental philosophy. While analytic naturalists wanted to abolish subjectivity as content of a false folk psychology, continental thinkers like Michel Foucault saw the image of the subject as a historical formation disappear like a face drawn into the sand by the sea-side. This prediction turned out to be both right and wrong in certain senses. Soon we may not be able to draw any face, let alone

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<sup>11</sup> David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (London: Melville House, 2015), ch. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Bernhard Malkmus, “Naturgeschichten vom Fisch, oder: Die Angst vor dem Anthropozän,” *Scheidewege* 45 (2015), 183-200.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan F. Donges, et al., “The Technosphere in Earth System Analysis: A Coevolutionary Perspective,” *The Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 1 (2017), 23-33.

subjects, in the sand anymore; because sand is vanishing at a drastic speed, used up as an increasingly rare natural resource. Subjects, however, comes back<sup>14</sup> with a vengeance. They have been reasserted both in the analytic and in the continental tradition: as entities for which it is like something to be in certain states (Nagel), respectively as voids which try to “fulfill” themselves by reaching to their outsides (Lacan—Žižek). If there has been a conspiracy against the subject, that plot has obviously failed.<sup>15</sup> As it happens in the Anthropocene and through it, this vengeance of the subject, however, turns against its own beneficiary, because human subjects in the Anthropocene experience their own subjectivity as something shallow, hollow, as it is manifested unintended as a geological force. Moreover, the subjects in question are involved in the hyperobjects of the Anthropocene by corresponding narcissist moods. Not only do they have corresponding mental states, they are also “in these moods,” as ordinary language would have it.

But if the Anthropocene has a mental side, one can wonder *whose* mental side this is, especially if it does not belong to the individual human subjects but rather, the other way round, they belong to it. Here the speculation can be taken one step further: The Anthropocene has not only a mental side, it is a mental inside, and there is a subject which has this mental inside. For moods could have their mentioned function—making feel what it is like to be part of a comprehensive whole—not only in a “horizontal” sense, for subjects and their relations on a same order of magnitude, but also “vertically,” for subjects on different but related orders of magnitude.

The concept of subjects on different orders of magnitude applied here is borrowed from a newly aspiring position in the philosophy of mind: panpsychism.<sup>16</sup> This position reacts to the crisis of non-reductive physicalism and materialism altogether by supposing that whenever subjects are synchronically grounded in anything, there already have to be subjects (or proto-subjects) belonging to the grounding instance as the sufficient reason for the grounded subjects. According to the terminology of panpsychism, the grounded subjects are macrosubjects and the grounding subjects are microsubjects. As any philosophical movement, panpsychism comes in many shapes and sizes. For the present purpose a

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<sup>14</sup> On the renaissance of the subject as topic of philosophy, see: Véronique Zanetti, “Einleitung,” in *Anatomie der Subjektivität. Bewusstsein, Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstgefühl*, ed. Thomas Grundmann, et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 9-26.

<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: A Spectre is Haunting Western Academia...,” *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2008), xxiii-xxviii. See this whole volume on the concept of the subject as a void or gap.

<sup>16</sup> On the panpsychism, see: Godehard Brüntrup, Ludwig Jaskolla, “Introduction,” *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Godehard Brüntrup, Ludwig Jaskolla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-16. See the whole volume as a representative collection on panpsychism and the current discussion of it.

restriction to the following kind of panpsychism is advisable (because it can cope with the possibility that we, too, are microsubjects): Emergent panpsychism as outlined by Godehard Brüntrup and foreshadowed by Alfred North Whitehead argues that “[t]he many become one and they are increased by one,”<sup>17</sup> which means, many microsubjects become one in the weak sense that they enter into a mutual relation which presumably is characterized by the number of the participants, the density and the intensity of their interactions.<sup>18</sup> And thereby a macrosubject is grounded which does not consist *of* the microsubjects, but *through* them, and which can act in turn on the microsubjects.<sup>19</sup> So the microsubjects do not get lost in the macrosubject; they remain what they are, entangled in their mutual relations, without even having to be aware of the presence of the macrosubject.

As the grounding relation obtains between the microsubjects as such, it has to consist in something specific for these microsubjects, namely in some kind of experienced mental states they are in, in the way it feels for them to stand in such a relation. Philip Goff calls this “Phenomenal Bonding.”<sup>20</sup> As has been argued, the way it feels for a subject to be in such a relation is a mood. Therefore microsubjects are kept in the relation which grounds a macrosubject by moods—be it single moods or whole patterns of them, as long as they maintain or even strengthen that relation. In order to be persistent, macrosubjects have to keep up these moods—usually not intentionally, rather by a process with this going on with them, comparable to a hurdy-gurdy player handling a wheel that keeps its instrument playing who does not intend to keep different mechanical parts in motion of whom he may not even know.

Contemporary panpsychism usually situates subjects only on two levels: the bottom level of the elements of the physical world and the level of human subjects. So human subjects are taken to be macrosubjects only and at the same time as the only macrosubjects there are. By the basic assumptions of panpsychism as depicted above, however, this restriction is

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<sup>17</sup> Godehard Brüntrup, “Emergent Panpsychism,” in *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Godehard Brüntrup, Ludwig Jaskolla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 48-71. The quotation by Whitehead is on p.69.

<sup>18</sup> Uwe Voigt, “Wie ist es, ein Mikrosubjekt zu sein?” in *Geist-Erfahrung*, ed. Manfred Negele (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2019, in print).

<sup>19</sup> Although Brüntrup in “Emergent Panpsychism,” like most contemporary panpsychists, takes pains to distinguish his position from interactive dualism, it seems to be compatible with it. And this compatibility does not need to be shunned, as interactive dualism recently has turned out to be a defensible stance in philosophy of mind. See Uwe Meixner, *The Two Sides of Being: A Reassessment of Psycho-Physical Dualism* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Philip Goff, “The Phenomenal Bonding Solution to the Combination Problem,” *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Godehard Brüntrup, Ludwig Jaskolla (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 283-302.

not forced.<sup>21</sup> If it is given up for the sake of the present speculation, panpsychism can contribute to a deeper understanding of what is going on in the Anthropocene: As the organisms on this planet, through their ecological interactions, have created and are maintaining a chemical atmosphere in which and by which they in turn live on different orders of magnitude, in the Anthropocene the subjects on this planet have created, through their various interactions as subjects, a mental atmosphere (a mood or patterns of moods). The production and maintenance of this mental atmosphere is embedded in the usual physical media into which those interactions are entangled—media which also turn out to be hyperobjects. These interactions of subjects within hyperobjects finally ground a subject for which the mentioned mood or mood-patterns are its proper mental state. This subject is a macrosubject chiefly grounded by other macrosubjects; inspired by the term “hyperobject” such a subject can be called “hypersubject”. That would mean, on its inmost side, the so-called Anthropocene is the age of a global hypersubject which is grounded on the dynamics of the above-mentioned hyperobjects and on the subjectivity of its microsubjects involved in these hyperobjects and in the technosphere which they are forming. The hypersubject, so to speak, would be the ghost in the machinery of the technosphere. Or, to put it in a less drastic manner, it is the team-spirit which keeps us handling the switchboards of that machinery so that it does not stop.<sup>22</sup> Because in order to persist, that hypersubject has to, however involuntarily and unknowingly, influence the mental states, the moods, of its microsubjects so that they keep up their being involved in the hyperobjects. This connection also gives a hint why these moods are characterized by narcissism: Narcissism, at least as we know it from human cases, is regularly caused by early social isolation. A global hypersubject would be the first and only of its kind on this planet and therefore a very drastic case of social isolation, of existing alone on its order of magnitude, without being cultivated by intersubjective interactions. Hence the felt emptiness but also limitlessness which would be a—or the—mental state of this subject and consequently of the comprehensive whole of which its microsubjects (chiefly: us) are parts. What seem to be quasi-transcendental properties of subjects in phenomenological analysis, like loneliness, boredom, anxiety, thus would turn out to be accidental properties of subjects of a certain geological age, namely the Anthropocene. This could also be a clue for settling the open question when the Anthropocene began: around the time which in occidental

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<sup>21</sup> Voigt, “Wie ist es.”

<sup>22</sup> The last two sentences may be taken as a parody of Gilbert Ryle’s well-known slogans against interactive dualism. And that would be correct, because the context of these slogans could turn out to be a piece of rhetoric rather than of conclusive argumentation. See Uwe Meixner, *Defending Husserl* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 34-59, 251- 279.

culture is called “Baroque,” because this time is also coined by expressions of the feeling that the world itself has become “vain,” that it is governed by an entity called *Vanitas*.<sup>23</sup> Around that time, in an open letter to the scientists of the Royal Society, the Moravian scholar John Amos Comenius warned his contemporaries that modern civilization, if developed with the sole aim of increasing human power over the earth, would resemble a new “Tower of Babel,” directing its spike not against heavens, as the first one did, but against this planet.<sup>24</sup> Nowadays Comenius could take his warning to be justified, given the “Golden Spikes” of the Anthropocene we face today.

### **A Way Through the Anthropocene?**

If the preceding considerations are right, we are inside the Anthropocene in a threefold sense: It is the time we are living in; it is a mental atmosphere which pervades us; and we are within the grounding basis of a hypersubject for which this mental atmosphere is a state of mind. There are no, or at least no easy ways out of such an Anthropocene. Of course it offers problems of various kinds, ecological, economic, political, social etc., which have to be tackled within their own domains. All attempts to solve these problems, however, could be under the influence of that atmosphere of narcissism which may be a contributing factor for several conflicts we experience on different levels, be they individual, ethnic, national or international—conflicts centered around a supposedly threatened identity which, at a closer look, seems to be quite hollow even or especially for those who pretend to defend it. Also in this case, the only way out might be the way through which at the same time is a way deeper into the Anthropocene. This way starts with the question how we can understand ourselves—and us mutually—as subjects living in the Anthropocene. One approach towards an answer to this question has been offered here: We have to face also the mental side of the Anthropocene. And this means, we have to face our own narcissist inclinations and counter them with an endeavor for courageous humility even and also in the intellectual sphere.<sup>25</sup> And we have to face other subjects which share the life inside this mental atmosphere with us—the feral animals which live in a global age of fear, and finally also the hypersubject, which lives in isolation on its order of magnitude. These tasks can be fulfilled only if we develop a global culture, as it was already envisioned in Baroque times

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<sup>23</sup> John Amos Comenius, *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce*, in *Dílo Jana Amose Komenského* (Praha: Academia, 1978), ch. 33.

<sup>24</sup> John Amos Comenius, *Via Lucis*, in *Dílo Jana Amose Komenského* (Praha: Academia, 1974): “*Illuminatis Seculi Phosphoris*,” § 24, 290.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Samuelson, and Ian M. Church, *Intellectual Humility: An Introduction to Philosophy and Science* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

as antidote against the world-domination of vanity,<sup>26</sup> in the sense that we enable all human individuals to cultivate themselves, their groups, the manifold relations in which they live and through which they are embedded into the hyperobjects of the Anthropocene, so that emptiness and loneliness are no longer central contents of their subjectivity. The speculation above, bleak as it may seem at first look, may encourage us to do so, because it argues that the concept of a void subject is not the last word in a phenomenological analysis of subjectivity but just the interim result of what it is like to be a subject in the Anthropocene. The way of subjects—and also of us as subjects—through the Anthropocene may be led by the insight that it ain't necessarily, but is just temporarily so, and it is also up to us—to the measure of the responsibility each of us, each of our groups has—to change it or to demand this change.

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<sup>26</sup> Uwe Voigt, “*Cultura Universalis*—a Challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?” in *Gewalt sei ferne den Dingen! Contemporary Perspectives on the Works of John Amos Comenius*, eds. Wouter Goris, Meinert A. Meyer, Vladimír Urbanek (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016), 199-207.