

(Environmental) Hermeneutics at the Heart of the Anthropocene: Ricoeurian and Gadamerian Perspectives

David Utsler

North Central Texas College, USA

Cynthia Nielsen

University of Dallas, USA

ORCID: 0000-0003-0971-7633

Introduction

Environmental hermeneutics is less concerned with the *fact* of the Anthropocene and more with the *interpretation* or *understanding* of the Anthropocene. It is one thing to designate this particular epoch with the term and quite another to explore what it *means* and, by extension, how we should *act*. If we do indeed reside in the Anthropocene, what will the world become? Both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasize that the task of hermeneutics is to speak to our present situation rather than to engage in some sort of recovery of the past. Ricoeur says, “to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text.”¹ Similarly, Gadamer explains: “Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs.”²

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 86. Italics original.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 398.

In this article we argue that the Anthropocene is a hermeneutical term. Indeed, designating a geological epoch with the term is already an interpretation. Since there is no static, single interpretation of anything that determines the course of thought or action, we have to ask ourselves, adapting to the hermeneutical situation to which we belong: What sorts of worlds might unfold in front of the Anthropocene, and in what sort of world might we imagine ourselves dwelling? The task of hermeneutics here (and in this case environmental hermeneutics in particular) is two-fold: 1) To demonstrate that the Anthropocene is not a term merely corresponding to a scientific set of facts but that those supposed neutral facts are understood and given meaning; and 2) to reflect upon how the Anthropocene, as a hermeneutical term, invites us to consider worlds that may unfold in front of the Anthropocene and our being-in-the-world that unfolds in front of it. What potential worlds do we wish to avoid, and which would we like to fashion?

The course of our analysis shall be as follows: First, we will make the case that the language of the Anthropocene is interpretive as it reveals a way of understanding and reflecting upon the current geologic epoch. Having shown the hermeneutical nature of the Anthropocene, we ask the question as to what this means for the future. Where shall we go now? What shall we do? It is with Ricoeur's philosophy of imagination and action that we first reply to these questions. Imagination, like fiction, has the capacity to redescribe reality and to suggest a course of action. The interpretation of our present epoch has inscribed within it a sense of expectation for the world that follows. Such expectation is itself a hermeneutical task. The guide to mediate this interpretive task can be found in Ricoeur's ethical intention, which he defines as living with and for others in just institutions. It is here that we rely on Gadamer's reflections on friendship and solidarity. We consider how these extend beyond merely human friendship and solidarity to the earth and nonhuman others. Avowed solidarity, in particular, as a response to the shared environmental crisis represented by the Anthropocene, offers a means of comportment toward fellow humans and the nonhuman world.

The Hermeneutical Characteristics of the Anthropocene

The conflicts surrounding the Anthropocene indicate that it is, in fact, a hermeneutical concept.³ The term itself was first proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000.⁴ The authors proposed the term to designate the current “geological epoch” following the Holocene on the basis of unprecedented human impact on the planet and the atmosphere. Crutzen and Stoermer proposed the latter part of the 18th century as the beginning of this epoch, but they did so modestly, noting that “alternative proposals” might be made and the arbitrariness of assigning a date with specificity. Other dates, based on how significant human impact is understood, have been proposed.⁵

One should not mistake the various proposals designating the beginning of the Anthropocene merely as different takes or disagreements over the hard facts of science and history. It is not as if the timing of the Anthropocene and the phenomena that “make” it the Anthropocene are determined by some objective static correspondence whereby dating and naming it is simply a matter of rightly recognizing a set of facts that are entirely external to human thinking. Crutzen and Stoermer are correct to acknowledge the arbitrary character of such an exercise. Among the various proposals for dating the beginning of the Anthropocene, there is not one that is right and the others wrong. But neither are we saying that the Anthropocene and when it is determined to have started is merely a human construction, entirely subjectively created, and that all interpretations are right because none of them can be wrong.

To the contrary, there is something hermeneutical in character occurring in the space between the material phenomena of this geological epoch and the particularly human action of naming and dating it. First, the impulse to name a new geological epoch suggests the observation of phenomena that is significantly different enough to claim one geological epoch (in this case the Holocene) has come, or is coming, to an end. Then, if there is something that should be given a new name based on new phenomena, when should we recognize that shift? Although there are differences of

³ For work addressing the hermeneutical aspects of the Anthropocene, see Forrest Clingerman, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 225–37; “Imagining Place and Politics in the Anthropocene,” in *Ethics and Politics of Space for the Anthropocene*, ed., Anu Valtonen, Outi Rantala, and Paolo Davide Farah (Camberly, UK: Edward Elgar, 2020), 17–34; Patryk Szaj, “Hermeneutics at the Time of the Anthropocene: The Case of Hans-Georg Gadamer,” *Environmental Values*, 30, no. 2 (2021): 235–54.

⁴ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18.

⁵ For a summary of different datings of the Anthropocene, see Clingerman, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene,” 227.

interpretations as to the timing wherein a new geological epoch should be understood to have begun, that a new geological epoch has begun is clearly a matter of agreement among those who would designate its beginning at different times. The real question is *when* this unprecedented human impact began, not *that* it has begun.

What is hermeneutical about these differences is the obvious aspect that these conflicting interpretations of what constitutes the beginning of the Anthropocene are just that—interpretations. But even more, a hermeneutical assessment of these differences, rather than being a matter of asking which dating is correct, would be to recognize that each potentially has its own validity in its own way.⁶ The conflict of interpretations does not imply the irreconcilability of interpretations, nor does it exclude the recognition that different understandings shed some light on the issue at hand. Each variance in interpretation has something to say.

A further hermeneutical response to the conflict of interpretations concerning dating the Anthropocene is the understanding that there is no decisive break between one epoch and another. Varying interpretations concerning the dating of the Anthropocene reveal that as one epoch is passing, another has already begun to arise. There is an overlap between them. Recognizing and naming geological epochs, being to some degree an arbitrary exercise subject to multiple interpretations, demonstrates that elements of the passing epoch pass over into those of the emerging epoch and elements of the emerging epoch first begin to germinate and grow in the passing epoch.

Another conflict of interpretations surrounding the Anthropocene is the name itself. As we stated in the introduction, naming an epoch is itself an interpretation. Presumably, Crutzen Stoemer looked at the degree of human impact on the planet and that the impact was such as to call for a new name. To name something is a use of language that presupposes an interpretation in some form or another. A name of any kind (of a person or any entity) seeks to describe what we understand something to be. “The Anthropocene” seeks to describe with a name the planetary phenomena that recognizes the degree of human impact on the planet. But a name also works to shape the way we understand phenomena. As Gadamer says, “Being that can be understood is language.”⁷ Conversely, language shapes the understanding of Being. The use of the term “Anthropocene” has the power to direct the understanding of that which is named.

⁶ This is not to say that any interpretation must be considered as valid. The possibility of understanding also means there is the possibility of misunderstanding—i.e., wrong interpretations.

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 470.

Such a language-directed understanding is not to be received uncritically or unreflectively. This is evident in the conflict of interpretations that can be seen in some of the objections to the term “Anthropocene” and in the offerings of alternate terms. For example, Anthropocene is derived, of course, from *anthropos*, focusing on the human impact on the planet. But this is problematic, because not all members of humanity can be held equally culpable for the destruction of the planet and the crisis of climate change. Rather, it is argued, that the environmental challenges we are facing today are more a consequence of the capitalist economy, so the epoch might be more accurately termed “Capitalocene.”⁸ Adrian Parr, for example, has offered a powerful and convincing case demonstrating the damaging environmental consequences of neoliberal capitalism in *The Wrath of Capital*.⁹ “Capitalocene” is a reasonable designation to consider as well.

So which should it be? Are we in the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene? Like a hermeneutic approach to dating the Anthropocene, hermeneutics would not see the naming of this geological epoch as if we just need to use the right term that corresponds to the facts. Language has a way of revealing without encompassing the totality of what words refer to. Sometimes a debate over two different terms is a debate precisely due to this limitation of language. In his assessment of the Gadamer–Habermas debate over hermeneutics and the critique of ideology, Ricoeur says he did not intend to select one over the other or seek to syncretize them. He writes: “I readily admit, along with Gadamer, that each of the two theories speaks from a different place; but I hope to show that each can recognize the other’s claim to universality in a way that marks the place of one in the structure of the other,” and that “each may be asked to recognize the other, not as a position that is foreign and purely hostile, but as one that raises in its own way a legitimate claim.”¹⁰

A hermeneutic approach to this conflict of interpretations (represented by a conflict of naming) would be to recognize the truth contained in each term. Certainly, the human impact on the planet has become unprecedented and the term Anthropocene speaks to this reality. Yet it can do so with the recognition that the term does not refer to each individual human equally. The critical-interpretive discourse of the Anthropocene also must not only ask “which humans” are impacting the planet but identify human activities that are causing harm and each to what degree. At the

⁸ Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

⁹ Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 271, 294–95.

very least, this sort of discourse would have to include the reality of neoliberal capitalism in human activities affecting the planet. Likewise, one could use the term “Capitalocene” while recognizing that capital and capitalism are uniquely human constructions and, in this respect, a Capitalocene is an Anthropocene. And is it only capitalism? What other factors drive the crisis we face? Obviously, productive discourse demands a mutual understanding of the use of terms or even final agreement on which one to use. But it need not be at the expense of the insights or truths that different terms contain.

Recognizing these limitations of language, we will use, for the purposes of this essay, the term “Anthropocene” as it seems to be more commonly used and accepted and is more encompassing.

Accepting that the Anthropocene is a hermeneutic term, there is an additional characteristic of hermeneutical thinking that we wish to address to the discourse of the Anthropocene. Interpretation is not a matter of uncovering the “right” interpretation of a set of facts. Interpretation is a recognition that interpretation is a process of understanding, which must account for the presence of multiple meanings. Ricoeur writes, “there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that plurality of meaning is made manifest.”¹¹ Hence, when we ask what the Anthropocene “means,” the answer is not necessarily univocal. In fact, it likely is not. Forrest Clingerman draws upon Ricoeur’s characterization of discourse as a dialectic of event and meaning. Clingerman explains, “As a discourse, the Anthropocene is not merely a brute state of affairs, but the name of a crossroads of different levels of interpretation that already have materialized in the midst of contemporary human engagement with the global environment.”¹²

Accepting that the hermeneutic character of the Anthropocene as a discourse of event and meaning, and that interpretation can legitimately account for multiple meanings, it would be a mistake to reduce it to any single meaning or any overarching meaning. The discourse of the Anthropocene is a discourse of valid possible meanings as well as those meanings that we would critique as “bad” interpretations. In an excellent and thought-provoking book, Frédéric Neyrat refers to the Anthropocene as a grand narrative to be avoided. He writes that “it is necessary to not get caught up in the official discourse of the Anthropocene, this new grand narrative that is presumed

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 13.

¹² Clingerman, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene,” 229.

to provide some kind of meaning for the future fates of humanity.”¹³ Later, Neyrat notes that grand narratives (or metanarratives), as Lyotard has described, seek to legitimize institutions and social practices that arise from them and seek to “establish their legitimacy with a *future* that must be brought into emergence.”¹⁴

Neyrat seems to accept only a particular interpretation of the Anthropocene—that of the geo-constructivists, who presume that whatever is happening to the planet we can engineer it in ways that we wish. Neyrat is correct to reject the grand narrative of the geo-constructivist interpretation of the Anthropocene, especially on the grounds that it is presented as a grand narrative (not to mention what the plot of that narrative happens to be). Still another reason to reject the geo-constructivist interpretation is to the extent it is presented as *the* meaning of the events designated as the Anthropocene. Neyrat warns us not to get caught up in the “official discourse of the Anthropocene.” We question to what extent geo-constructivism is an “official discourse” rather than just one discourse (and a very troubling one at that) among many. From a hermeneutical standpoint, contrary to Neyrat, we can not only question and critique the geo-constructivist discourse, but propose other levels of meaning, ones that are argued as better interpretations for the future of the planet and all its members, including humanity.

It is especially to the question of any future that would emerge from the Anthropocene—the historical situation to which we belong—that we now turn. Interpretation encompasses understanding our current historical situation, both in a dialogue with the past *and* a dialogue *about* the future. This hermeneutical perspective is particularly crucial as we consider not only the *now* of the Anthropocene, but the future(s) that potentially emerge from it. Hermeneutics proposes no metanarrative that must necessarily emerge that it would seek to legitimate. Philosophical hermeneutics proposes, to refer again to Ricoeur, possible ways of being-in-the-world that *might* unfold in front of the present interpretation and asks the question, what kind of world do we wish to emerge and within which to dwell. The remainder of this article, in the

¹³ Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, trans. Drew S. Burk (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 19. Neyrat’s book is a good example of the issues that make up the ecomodernist vs. degrowth debate, which he references throughout. From a hermeneutical standpoint, both the ecomodernist and the degrowth agendas represent what we argue in the next section of this paper: namely, the hermeneutic task is to envision what world will unfold in front of the Anthropocene. Both ecomodernism and degrowth represent approaches to action that will bring forth the world that unfolds next. The critical hermeneutic task is to differentiate whether each represents an interpretation that is desirable or if one or both are less than desirable interpretations.

¹⁴ Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth*, 35. Italics original.

next two sections respectively, will address the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Gadamer to the discourse of the Anthropocene.

Paul Ricoeur: Imagination and Action

A rudimentary principle of philosophical hermeneutics (especially since Gadamer and Ricoeur) is that the practice of interpretation exists in the now. Rather than uncovering a hidden meaning that exists in a static “lifeless rigidity,”¹⁵ interpretation constantly brings the past into the present, into the horizon of the interpreter’s world. Regarding tradition, for example, Gadamer says, “The historical life of a tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted.”¹⁶ This is true for anything that is interpreted (understood), not just a tradition. Understanding the discourse of the Anthropocene this way, we would say that there is no static, lifeless meaning that this term simply references. As we noted, the naming of a geological historical epoch is already an interpretation; it is a linguistic effort to adapt to the historical situation to which we belong. Moreover, the naming of the Anthropocene is a dialogue with the previous geological epoch that suggests the present horizon of understanding has unfolded in front of the last. The present, after all, was once the future. The next hermeneutical task, therefore, is to propose what will unfold in front of the Anthropocene.

The past is assimilated, or appropriated, into the present, which in turn opens up to proposed worlds. This is why Ricoeur says, “I shall say: to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text.” Ricoeur further explains:

Above all, the vis-à-vis of appropriation is what Gadamer calls the “matter of the text” and what I call here “the world of the work.” Ultimately, what I appropriated is a proposed world. The latter is not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed. So understanding [interpretation]

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 57.

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398.

is quite different from a constitution of which the subject would possess the key. In this respect, it would more correct to say that the *self* is constituted by the “matter” of the text.¹⁷

This last part also speaks to something found in both Gadamer and Ricoeur: all interpretation entails self-interpretation. So to look at the present world of the Anthropocene and to propose a world that would unfold in front of it, we are also saying something about ourselves. Ultimately, a hermeneutical adaptation to the present in which we belong is also a “where do we go from here?” orientation.

In light of the foregoing, if we are to address the question of the Anthropocene, we must ask not only what it means in the present but where we are to go from here. When we look at the condition of the planet now (and understand what produced the contemporary situation), we must ask what we want that condition to be tomorrow. Ricoeur observes that “the expectation of the future is inscribed in the present; it is the *future-become-present*, turned toward the not yet.”¹⁸ Without an idea or a vision of what tomorrow is to look like or could look like, taking action to call that potential future forth is aimless. In one sense, it can be said that the future is not yet “real” since it does not yet exist. Any ideas of the future have only the status of fiction. Employing the thought of Ricoeur, we propose imagination as the hermeneutical mediator between the “real” of the present and the “fiction” of the future. As Ricoeur demonstrated in his work, there is no fiction that can be imagined without reference to the real. Therefore, it is in imagination (the image) that we can project potential futures of a world in which we wish to live and, we argue, imagination is the condition of action that will produce what the real will become.

Ricoeur places his theory of the imagination under what he refers to the *poetics of the will*. Some might dismiss the idea of a poetics on the claim that we are dealing with profoundly serious and *real* issues in the Anthropocene and do not have time for poetics. Ricoeur thinks otherwise. He asserts that “the best test of its claim to universality lay in determining its capacity for extension to the sphere of practice.”¹⁹ If the fiction of imagination can lay claim to universality, it will demonstrate such by its capacity to be put into practice. Ricoeur then rehearses several obstacles that arise from the imagination in philosophy that would set it at odds from the real.

The image (the stuff of imagination) is looked at in two different ways we will explain here. In a Humean sense, an image is the product of a sense experience, a

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 87–88. Italics original.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 218. Italics original.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 168.

perception, and is thought of in a weakened form; what Hume referred to as a decay of sense, and what Ricoeur calls a “trace” or “weakened presence.” For example, if you take a trip to the beach your senses take in the smell of the brine and salt water, the warmth of the climate, and the sound of the waves. When you return from your trip, your mind can refer to these sensations to where you can recall them, yet it is still not the same as the actual sense experience. The perception in the mind, the image, is a weakened presence. Further still, in a Sartrean sense, the image is otherwise than presence. The presence of the image is the absence of the real. This would seem to apply to the idea of the use of imagination concerning things yet to be. Whatever we imagine the future to be, it is still the absence of any reality it represents.

Ricoeur proposes another way to consider the imagination: the critical consciousness. On one end of this axis, we have “zero critical consciousness,” whereby the image is mistaken for the real. This, Ricoeur says, is the realm of lies and errors, where what we imagine to be true is not. However, the further one moves down the axis toward critical consciousness, “imagination is the very instrument of the critique of the real.”²⁰ To distinguish between what is real and what is imagination is to permit imagination to assert what might be or even ought to be in opposition to the real as it is at present. The imaginative critical consciousness of the Anthropocene taken this way would be to understand the very real situation we are faced with in the Anthropocene and to critique it by imagining it otherwise. Further still, we argue that imagination that is aware of its critical consciousness can also critique competing fictions.

Referring back to *The Unconstructable Earth*, Neyrat outlines the geo-constructivist and geo-engineering imagination of the future where it does not seem to matter if humanity is a major geological force.²¹ Human activity causes climate change? No problem! We can simply engineer the climate and fix any problems we do not anticipate from our actions. The geo-constructivist future is no less fiction than one that imagines a world where such action is necessary to fix what previous actions have done, especially as the former fiction creates a cycle of repetition. The critical-hermeneutic imagination would offer a fiction that breaks the cycle of planetary destruction.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutical imagination reverses the direction of the image. Instead of looking at the image as an “appendix” to or a “shadow” of perception, where the perception is primary and then is weakened into an image, Ricoeur sets forth

²⁰ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 171.

²¹ Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth*.

the language of metaphor, whereby we begin in the imagination in order to bring the image into sense perception—i.e., material reality. The process, rather than deriving an image from a perception, is to derive it from language and then, by inference, to ultimately derive the perception (material reality) from the image. This suggests, clearly, that imagining a world that would unfold in front of the Anthropocene begins in discourse.

What we have just described is what Ricoeur calls the “semantic innovation” or a “semantic theory of imagination.” The question is how a theory of imagination rooted in language and discourse can get outside of itself toward action. How can imagination, expressed by language and metaphor, become reality? How does it create a new world? Before proceeding along these lines, let us interject that the future is coming, and the world-to-be will be the world-that-is as the future becomes the present. So the real question is, who will conceive of this world and what will they conceive? But, inevitably, it will come. What follows the Anthropocene or what the Anthropocene will evolve into will come to pass whatever it may be. Of course, there are issues of political and economic power and who wields it that has much to do with what is to come. Regardless, what is to come will first be an idea, an image.

On first glance, Ricoeur notes, “language is concerned only with itself and so lacks reference.”²² What Ricoeur means by reference is whether language posits something outside itself. Can the poetic-linguistic utterance of the image have reference? That is, can it posit something outside itself? On one hand, fiction is directed, Ricoeur says, nowhere (in terms of material reality), “but because it designates the nonplace in relation to all reality, it can indirectly sight this reality, following what I should like to call a new ‘reference-effect’. . . . This new reference-effect is nothing but the power of fiction to *redescribe reality*.”²³

Ricoeur at this point turns to non-poetic discourses that underscore the power of fiction to redescribe reality—scientific discourse. In scientific discourse, models are used to imagine new potential realities. Ricoeur draws a comparison between scientific models and fictions. He writes: “The trait common to models and to fictions is their *heuristic force*, that is to say, their capacity to open and unfold new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of belief in an earlier description.”²⁴ What Ricoeur does not point out in this passage is that even models have no function or meaning outside of imagination. Who works with models? Human beings. Whatever new dimensions of reality a model has the power to suggest or unveil, it is still going to be interpreted.

²² Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 174.

²³ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 175. Italics original.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 175. Italics original.

It is still going to have an associative meaning. It is still going to be imagined in its application according to sets of prejudices (in Gadamer's use of the term). As in anything that can be a subject of hermeneutics (which is pretty much everything), there are going to be levels of meaning to unfold and which will, as Richard Kearney explains, require adjudication.²⁵ There are no uninterpreted models.

But how do we adjudicate? How do we make the move from imagination to action? Ricoeur offers the following:

The first transition from the theoretical to the practical is within our reach to the extent that what certain fictions redescribe is, precisely, human action itself. Or, to say the same thing the other way around, the first way human beings attempt to understand and to master the "manifold" of the practical field is to give themselves a fictive representation of it.²⁶

The move from imagination to action, Ricoeur seems to be suggesting, is to imagine how we will do it! Specifically, he goes on to discuss the power of narrative. To tell a story, to create a narrative, redescribes action and then joined to *mimesis* (imitation), maps out a course of action. Ricoeur says that the one who constructs a narrative "produces the same reference-effect of the poet" who "imitates reality by reinventing it mythically. Or to employ the vocabulary of models. . . one could say that narrative is a procedure of redescription, in which the heuristic function proceeds from the narrative structure and redescription has action itself as its referent."²⁷

Ricoeur insists that action is predicated on imagination. Imagination projects itself onto the field of action. "It is imagination that provides the milieu, the luminous clearing in which we can compare and evaluate motives as diverse as desires and ethical obligations, themselves as disparate as professional rules, social customs, or intensely personal values."²⁸ Imagination is presented as a mediating force between these diversities. It is the place where all the different variables that arise from multiple interpretations can be tested. From imagination arises the discourse that will produce actions aimed at a projected world in which we wish to dwell.

The Anthropocene is no doubt a discourse that attempts to describe the current state of the human condition in relation to the geologic condition of the earth. As a discourse, the Anthropocene is hermeneutical. That is to say, our encounter with

²⁵ See Richard M. Kearney, "What Is Diacritical Hermeneutics?" *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2011, Article 2 (2011): 1–14, doi: <https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.v0i0.53187>.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 176.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177.

²⁸ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177.

the condition of the planet seeks to make sense of it, to understand it, and to uncover meaning. Furthermore, the discourse of the Anthropocene calls for determinations of human action in plotting a map for the future. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of imagination and human action accurately describes what takes place among interlocutors of the Anthropocene. The fundamental question of the Anthropocene is what we must do now, because what we do now, or do not do now, will determine where the Anthropocene will lead us. Action is the fruit of imagination. We must, therefore, imagine both how and in what sort of world we wish to dwell.

Of course, what we imagine and how we act on it is a collective effort. Here, Ricoeur's definition of what he calls the "ethical intention" is instructive. Ricoeur defines the ethical intention as "*aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions.*"²⁹ Yes, we aim at a life that is good, but not as isolated, autonomous individuals. First, we recognize that we must aim at the good life with one another. One might say that we have been cast into the existential situation of sharing this planetary space with one another. As I seek the good life for me, I am also seeking it with *you*. I am not merely seeking the good life *with you* in the sense of merely being alongside you, however. I am also seeking the good life for you;³⁰ to say *self*, Ricoeur says, is never just to say *myself* (which is the whole point of his work *Oneself as Another*). I must, in solicitude, recognize each Other's *nonsubstitutibility* and *irreplaceability*, anchored in my place and placing "myself in the place of the other in imagination and sympathy."³¹ Finally, the good life that we seek with and for each other must be embodied in "just institutions." This speaks to the political and collective nature of the pursuit of the good life. Attainment of the good life cannot effectively be realized outside of social institutions that are just.

In the context of the Anthropocene, there must be a recognition that the good life we seek together with and for each other is necessarily joined to the health of the planet. There are two reciprocal ways to understand this. As embodied and emplaced beings, our ethical solicitude for one another must take into account the place wherein we are embodied. Our survival and our flourishing happen somewhere—i.e., the planet—so seeking the good life with and for each other in just institutions must

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172. Italics original.

³⁰ Seeking the good life *with* others indicates the good life is not a matter of individualistic good but that the good is reciprocal and communal. Seeking the good life *for* others is the logical consequence of this reciprocal and communal character of the ethical intention. If I am seeking the good life for me, I recognize that I must also seek it with you, and if I am seeking it with you, then I am obliged to seek it for you. There is no good life for me that is not a good life with you and for you.

³¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 180, 193.

account for this somewhere in our imagination and action. But can we also consider the planet itself in our solicitude? Can nonsubstitutibility and irreplaceability be imputed to the planet in Ricoeur's framework? How can we make Ricoeur's ethical intention become "seeking the good life with and for both human and nonhuman others in environmentally just institutions"?³² Our next section will explore how this might be imagined.³³

Thinking with and beyond Gadamer: Solidarity and Friendship beyond the *Anthropos*

In the previous sections, we focused on the hermeneutical dimensions of the discourse of the Anthropocene and then drew upon Ricoeur's work on imagination as a way to conceive a new course of action. In this section, we turn to Gadamer in order to explore how his post-*Truth and Method* reflections on solidarity and friendship might be fruitfully deployed in the service of environmental hermeneutics. In particular, we want to consider how we might think about our solidaristic bonds with and obligations to the environment and natural others beyond the *anthropos*. In his 1999 essay, "Friendship and Solidarity," Gadamer focuses primarily on natural and avowed solidarities; however, he also speaks of genuine, real, and authentic solidarity.³⁴ Unfortunately, he is not consistent with his terminology. For example, at times he

³² For a more indepth analysis of Ricoeur's ethical intention in relationship to the environment, see Nathan M. Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others: Ricoeur's Ethics and the Ecological Self," in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, ed. Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 141–59.

³³ The foregoing section of our essay is primarily intended to demonstrate the hermeneutical task of imagining worlds that might unfold in front of the Anthropocene, not to examine what those might be. We would be remiss not to mention a term coined by Glenn A. Albrecht in 2011 that does imagine a world beyond the current epoch. Albrecht calls us to exit the Anthropocene and to enter the "Symbiocene." See Glen A. Albrecht, "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene," *Psychoterratica* (blog), 17 December 2015, <https://glennaalbrecht.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene/>. "Symbiocene" also can be construed as a term that joins the preceding section with the one that follows on Gadamer on friendship and solidarity. In this vein, see the works of Richard Louv, especially *Our Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals Can Transform our Lives—and Save Theirs* (Chapel Hill, NC: Alonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2019) in which he also gives some treatment to the concept of the Symbiocene.

³⁴ See, especially, Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity," *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009): 3–12 ["Freundschaft und Solidarität [1999]," in *Hermeneutische Entwürfe: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 56].

seems to conflate genuine solidarity with natural solidarity. Other times, he implies that genuine or real [*echte*] solidarity is what results from the respective recognition and achievement of natural and avowed solidarities. We attempt to disambiguate the terms as much as possible; consequently, we use genuine, real, and authentic solidarity as synonyms and in the conjunctive sense described above.

With the above caveats in mind, we begin with the following questions: What does Gadamer mean by natural and avowed solidarity, and how does each relate to one another? Natural solidarity describes our social ontology as socially and relationally interdependent beings; it is what we *are* whether we recognize it or not. For instance, in his 1994 essay, “From Word to Concept,” he asserts that “human [natural] solidarity must be the basic presupposition under which we can work together to develop, even if only slowly, a set of common convictions [*gemeinsame Überzeugungen*]” in order to address global problems such as the environmental crisis.³⁵ Natural or genuine solidarity speaks of our fundamental relational belonging to one another; it is a basic, shared ontological “background” that we must assume so that we can work toward the achievement of common convictions that will then give rise to collective actions. Natural solidarity, thus, affirms our relational dependence and interdependence and thus our obligations and duties to one another and rejects the view of humans as atomistic individuals.

Natural solidarity serves as the condition for the possibility of avowed solidarity. We must, according to Gadamer, “ask ourselves what solidarity requires of us and what a so-called ‘avowed’ solidarity [*erklärte Solidarität*] should be.”³⁶ Avowed solidarity involves both a recognition of our natural solidaristic bonds and a commitment to act in order to strengthen, protect, and respect those bonds. As Gadamer explains, “[w]e must recognize how in life our groupings of association lead to solidarity and, in the process, to obligations to one another.”³⁷ Such associations include both those into which we are born, such as one’s family and homeland, and those that we choose, such as religious, cultural, or political associations. Family and homeland ties constitute natural solidarities, yet they do not necessitate that “one first avow one’s solidarity.”³⁸ By “natural” Gadamer has in mind neither a strict biological

³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. by Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 119.

³⁶ Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 3, 4 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 56, 57].

³⁷ Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 5 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 57].

³⁸ Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 7 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 60]. The full German text reads: “Aber daß Heimat und Herkunft eine Bindung darstellt, eine Art Gemeinsamkeit, eine Art Solidarität echter Art ist, da braucht es das nicht erst, daß man sich solidarisch erklärt.”

paradigm, nor that one's association with one's homeland forever and always determines one's identity. An adopted child, for example, is shaped by and implicated in natural solidaristic family ties just as much as a biological child, and both are free to dissociate themselves from their familial or homeland ties; however, such ties, given the formative roles that they typically involve, nonetheless impact individuals even when they are rejected.

Natural solidarity must be realized or actualized through actions that arise from and are constitutive of a solidarity of avowal. Opportunities to realize and strengthen our solidaristic ties often surface in periods of crises. To illustrate, Gadamer refers to a situation that he experienced during the war. As he explains, "the bombing in the war created solidarity. Suddenly your neighbors, those who in the circumstances of the city were unknown strangers, were awoken to life. So need works, and in particular a need felt by all so that undreamed of possibilities of feelings of solidarity and acts of solidarity come about."³⁹ Here the crisis that discloses our natural solidarity also gives rise to the enactment of an avowed solidarity. Such communal crises manifest an event-like quality that can serve as the occasion for bringing people together and even radically transforming social relationships. In Gadamer's example, those who were strangers and unknown to each other, in a time of communal crisis, began to work together for a common set of objectives. Crises such as war, pandemics, and our current ecological calamity, when recognized and properly attended to, disclose what was there already—namely, our interdependence, belongingness, and responsibility to one another. When we, as social and ethical beings, are awakened to our natural solidaristic ties, we are called to act both for ourselves and our own integrity as well as for the sake of and in concert with others. Events of communal crisis have the potential to disclose the "I" that is a "we"; they create the possibility for the achievement of avowed solidarities so that a community awakened to their natural solidaristic ties might work toward common beliefs, goals, or objectives. Avowed solidarity, then, must issue forth in some kind of action for and with others for the sake of a shared goal.⁴⁰

³⁹ Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity," 10 ["Freundschaft und Solidarität," 63].

⁴⁰ In order to elucidate various connotations of the word, "solidarity," Gadamer discusses its etymology. The term "solidarity" is derived the Latin word *solidum*, meaning "whole," as in the expression "*in solidum*," that is, "for the whole." He then traces the Latin term to the German expression "*der Sold*" (payment), which connotes genuineness rather than being a counterfeit as well as reliability and a firm commitment to fulfill what one has pledged. The term "solidarity" carries within it these various meanings of reliability, inseparability, genuineness, and commitment to the well-being of others (Gadamer, "Friendship and Solidarity," 11 ["Freundschaft und Solidarität," 63]).

Gadamer acknowledges that solidarities involve benefits and losses as well as sacrifices or freely chosen acts of self-renunciation for the sake of others. With the latter in view, he writes “[w]hen one declares oneself as in solidarity, whether freely or under duress, in every case there lies a renunciation of one’s own interests and preferences.”⁴¹ The self-renunciation and sacrifice of authentic solidarity should be distinguished from that of inauthentic and forced solidarity that compels self-renunciation to the detriment of both the individual and the community. However, the dividing lines are not so easily drawn in actual concrete situations. There may be situations in which the well-being or survival of a community will require laws that compel individuals to act in certain ways. For example, as our current crisis with COVID-19 has made clear, laws may be required that limit large gatherings, mandate wearing facemasks in public settings, and institute sheltering in place for specified periods of time. Such measures are taken, many would argue, for the common good and for the sake not only of one’s own health, but also for the sake of others, especially the elderly, immunocompromised, healthcare workers, and those who do not have the option to work from home. Of course, as the present situation in the United States testifies, there are significant differences among government leaders and citizens as to how we ought to respond individually and collectively to the pandemic.⁴² Gadamer recognizes the ambiguities and tensions of solidaristic ties and comments on how forced political solidarities can be and have been harmful. For example, he writes: “One thinks perhaps of the discipline of the party that is difficult to keep in some instances of political life, such as if one is of a completely different opinion from the majority of one’s party.”⁴³ Even so, and again with the pandemic in mind, our shared physical spaces and mutual, physical vulnerability to spread or be infected by the virus discloses solidaristic ties that in “normal times” often remain hidden. To ignore these shared realities is, in the present situation, literally a matter of life and death.

As we have seen, avowed solidarities are frequently occasioned when a significant event—here a communal crisis—discloses our natural solidaristic bonds and awakens us to our interdependence and ethical obligations to others. The recognition and enactment of our solidaristic bonds share certain structural similarities with Gadamer’s understanding of the festival in his discussion of our experience of art. In contrast with our mundane work lives, in which we experience one another as

⁴¹ Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 11 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 63–64].

⁴² See Cynthia R. Nielsen and David Liakos, “Dialogical Breakdown and Covid-19: Solidarity and Disagreement in a Shared World,” *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2020, Article 11 (2020): 1–12, doi: <https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.vi0.71551>.

⁴³ Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity,” 11 [“Freundschaft und Solidarität,” 64].

separate individuals performing tasks related to our specific function or role in an organization or institution, in a festive celebration we experience ourselves as united.⁴⁴ The festival as a public, intersubjective event, gathers us together and discloses the reality of our natural solidarity.

Somewhat like the mysterious disclosive-gathering power of a festival-event, our solidaristic ties likewise have an enigmatic quality about them that resists precise delineation into fixed conceptual categories. Like art, solidarities involve our emotions, bodily presence, materiality, and that which exceeds conceptual capture. For solidarity to be authentic rather than compelled, individuals must choose to enact it. “It is necessary to make clear that real solidarity [*echte Solidarität*] depends on the individuals who have avowed themselves to it and stood up for it.”⁴⁵ Again, Gadamer’s account here of avowed solidarity exhibits similarities with his description of the dynamic, performative, and participatory ontology of artworks. That is, just as the artwork requires active participatory engagement for its presentation and enactment, so too, avowed solidarity that is authentic requires active, intentional engagement. Consequently, in order to remain vibrant, solidarities must be continually enacted and cultivated anew. But if this is the case, then just as artworks are in some significant sense co-created when performed, so too are solidarities continually co-created anew over time.

Here we turn to briefly discuss aspects of Gadamer’s account of friendship and how one might think of our relationships not only with humans but with natural and earth others as bonds of solidarity and perhaps even something like friendship. Following Aristotle, Gadamer highlights different types of friendships from those of pleasure, to those of use, and then finally a friendship of *arête* or virtue, which he describes as a “true” (*wahre*), “complete” (*vollkommene*), and “actual friendship” (*wirkliche Freundschaft*).⁴⁶ A true friendship is characterized by an at-homeness not found in other types of friendship and associations. In addition, a true or complete friendship involves a mutual embrace of the otherness of the other and a giving “to one another our being as Other.”⁴⁷ Friends of the highest sort will, no doubt, have similar interests and pursuits. In this sense, “one recognizes oneself in others and the other recognizes

⁴⁴ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 40 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8: *Ästhetik und Poetik I: Kunst als Aussage* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 130].

⁴⁵ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 11 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 64].

⁴⁶ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 7 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 60].

⁴⁷ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 9 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 62].

itself in us.”⁴⁸ Yet, Gadamer underscores that such friends are not simply mirror images of one another. Neither solidarity nor friendship is based on unanimity and the erasure of all difference. True friends recognize that their flourishing requires an Other, who both pursues a life of excellence and is willing to offer criticism when one falls short. Given their knowledge—albeit limited and imperfect—of their own shortcomings, they recognize that they will repeatedly fail themselves and their friend: “And so the true, deep meaning of such self-knowledge is precisely that one never [*fully*] recognizes the biases of one’s own self-love even when one believes oneself to be a correct friend of the Other.”⁴⁹ Gadamer acknowledges that the “at-homeness” characteristic of true friendship is imperfect and always in process of being worked out with others. Toward the end of his essay, he describes avowed solidarity as “a promise of a payment of friendship [*eine Zusage im Rate der Freundschaft*], which is limited, like everything, as it calls on the complete dedication of our good will.”⁵⁰ In other words, avowed solidarity “as a promise of a payment of friendship” demands a commitment to and for others that presupposes and is maintained by an ongoing self-questioning and openness to learn from and be challenged by others. Those familiar with Gadamer’s work know that self-questioning and openness are central to his account of philosophical hermeneutics and any Gadamerian-inspired hermeneutical ethic.

In light of this emphasis on self-questioning and openness to the other, we pose the following questions: What are earth and natural others saying to humans in this moment of the Anthropocene? Given our collective actions that have resulted in such harm to the natural world, do we not have an obligation to listen to what it is saying and respond accordingly? Can we fruitfully apply Gadamer’s insights on friendship and solidarity to earth and natural others? While recognizing that friendship among humans can only be applied analogously with friendship among earth and natural others, we, nonetheless, want to begin to imagine possible ways of thinking about friendship that extends beyond the *anthropos*. Solidaristic ties with earth and natural others are less controversial and more easily envisaged. Our very existence depends upon having access, for example, to clean air and water. As studies and reporting on factory-farming reveal, our collective choices regarding the treatment of animals raised for food show that “efficiency” and monetary profit as the primary guides for action harm not only the animals but likewise the environment and

⁴⁸ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 9 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 62].

⁴⁹ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 9 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 62]. We have slightly altered David Vessey’s translation by inserting the word “*fully*” to reflect the German text.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 12 [“Die Aktualität des Schönen,” 64].

humans.⁵¹ We, undoubtedly, depend on and live in relations of interdependence with the natural world and nonhuman animals. However, our solidaristic ties have been denied through our exploitative practices and relationships with earth and natural others, which see both as mere resources for us to use and manipulate as we please. Rather than seeing ourselves as masters of the earth in relations of domination, we must recognize our dependence and interdependence on one another. Such recognition will require a new respect for and appreciation of the alterity of ecosystems, nonhuman animals, forests, mountain ranges, and natural water sources. We must learn to dwell in harmony with the natural order, engaging it as a work of art whose beauty and singularity, when lingered with, can facilitate a transformation in how we see and relate to natural others. In light of language's role in shaping how we see and live in the world, we encourage the adoption and employment of new metaphors such as "living or dwelling in harmony" with the natural world or seeing ourselves as "cultivators" rather than "masters" of the earth.

What about friendship? Is there a sense in which we can speak of our friendship with the earth and natural others? Riffing on Gadamer's description of avowed solidarity as "a promise of a payment of friendship," perhaps a comportment toward earth and natural others as a kind of friendship would prove both mutually beneficial and world-altering for humans, other animals, and the earth.⁵² A friendship of this sort would approach the environment and other animals as genuine others worthy of respect. It would seek to listen and respond to what the earth and nonhuman animals are saying to us in light of our present harmful, collective actions. Lastly, it would seek to change those actions and ways of being that disrespect, destroy, and have no regard for the integrity and intrinsic value of ecosystems, nonhuman animals, forests, oceans, nature preserves, and myriad natural others whose beauty and being impact and shape our own being—and, moreover, whose being makes our being possible and sustains it.

⁵¹ See Andrew Chignell, Terrence Cuneo, and Matthew C. Halteman, eds., *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵² Edward O. Wilson's "biophilia hypothesis" would lend further credence to an understanding of friendship and solidarity in Gadamer applying to our relationship with the more-than-human world. See *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Conclusion

All human thought on historical or geological epochs is interpretation. The task of hermeneutics, as Gadamer wrote, “is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place.”⁵³ In light of the contemporary environmental crises we face, hermeneutics has a formidable task as well as a pressing responsibility to clarify those conditions in which environmental understanding occurs. Hermeneutics offers perspectives for moving forward so that we might imagine and create a more sustainable and ecologically harmonious world. We have proposed Ricoeur’s work on imagination and action and Gadamer’s work on friendship and solidarity as one way of gesturing toward a post-Anthropocene existence that encompasses the interests and well-being of human and nonhuman others, being with and for all others in just institutions.

⁵³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.