

*Retrospective Redundancy: The
Anthropocene and the Sense of History*

Alexandre Pierre Leskanich

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Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

School of Humanities

Royal Holloway College, University of London

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Alexandre Pierre Leskanich, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical and diagnostic contribution to the question of the ‘sense’ of history in a situation of unprecedented precarity. The name assigned to this situation, the Anthropocene, is employed to denote an astonishing range of environmental and climatic impacts on the earth system inflicted by the human species in the recent course of its history, with consequences on a scale sufficient to register in geological time. With the devastating effects of human action reverberating around the globe and down the ages, the prospect of human civilisation becoming a stratigraphic layer in the planet’s crust prompts the need for an existential reassessment of human Being. This reassessment aims not to finally comprehend the Anthropocene (i.e. consolidate or fossilise its meaning), but to scrutinise the conditions which make it possible, its impact on human consciousness, and its ramifications for human self-comprehension.

To this end, this thesis offers the following propositions: that *administration* is a means of *comprehension* that aims to *manage* human affairs; that history, conceived here as the *measure* of reality itself, therefore constitutes the most *comprehensive technology* for managing existence ever devised, ensuring that the world presents itself as a meaningful historical arrangement; that this situation gives rise to a world utterly *historicized*; the poverty of which has lately spawned the Anthropocene as a *comprehensive administrative categorisation* that despite its *identitary structure* fails in its *retrospective redundancy* to compensate for the inadequacy of the historical situation it aims to comprehend; and is therefore symptomatic of a world that has not just been *historically mismanaged*, but in which *historical comprehension has itself broken down*. This thesis concludes, therefore, that in the apprehensive, totally historicized circumstances it affirms, maintains, and entrenches, the Anthropocene evinces nothing less than ‘the mind at the end of its tether’; denuded of the orientating power it traditionally derived from history, yet incapable of escaping from its clutches.

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Introduction: *'The syndrome of total accomplishment'*

The Geological Time Scale organises the history of the earth – which spans around four and a half billion years – into geochronological units of time. These units correspond to stratifications or layers in sedimentary rock (otherwise known as strata). Geologists mark the stratifications according to changes in its chemical composition. At present, the time scale divides the earth's history into aeons, eras, periods, epochs, and ages. Our current aeon, known as the Phanerozoic Aeon, is divided into three eras: the Paleozoic, the Mesozoic, and our current era, the Cenozoic, which spans around sixty-six million years. The Cenozoic era is subdivided into three periods: the Paleogene, the Neogene and the Quaternary. This latest, contemporary period so far contains two epochs, namely the Pleistocene and the Holocene, the latter of which spans a mere 11,700 years to the present day. These periodisations are sanctioned and given final authority by both the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences.

In August of 2016 the Anthropocene Working group recommended to the Commission that the Anthropocene – used to denote a new geo-historical epoch – be officially added to the Geological Time Scale. Formal approval to include it is now pending disciplinary ratification. In geological and stratigraphic terms, the Anthropocene constitutes a temporal segmentation in geo-historical time; a radical disjuncture from the Holocene. Much has been made in recent years of the Anthropocene, associated as it is with the broadest imaginable summary of the human condition. Centred on the human species, the content of the human subject – its responsibilities, potentialities, and penchant for self-destructive behaviour – are scrutinised anew. In the Anthropocene the human condition, we are informed, is the global condition. Anthropogenic activity has

recalibrated the parameters of possibility on earth, not least for human beings themselves. Gradually, incrementally, the terms on which existence has been negotiated and arranged, the contractual obligations self-imposed upon human beings, seem increasingly outdated.

This thesis is therefore envisioned as an existential examination of the Anthropocene at a conceptual, philosophical level, informed by an awareness of it at an empirical level – in particular, at the level of subjective, sensory experience. Naturally, given its sheer scale and the inability of the present writer to comment competently on the scientific evidence on which it is based, plus the ambiguity of its potential meaning, it aims not to finally comprehend it. Instead, as a form of knowledge signifying a body of scientific evidence, the guiding question here concerns its epistemological, experiential, and ultimately existential implications. That is, it is interested not just in the Anthropocene *per se* but in the character of the situation to which it is a response.

The Anthropocene has an epistemological dimension insofar as it changes and adds to what is humanly known; aiming to amplify or extend the scope of human world-comprehension. It has an experiential dimension insofar as how what it makes empirically known at an abstract level figures or is made manifest subjectively: at the level of individual consciousness. This experiential dimension is crucial: so far as the Anthropocene is concerned, it involves asking what it affectively, immediately means to live in the critical situation it signifies. The existential dimension incorporates these other dimensions, both of which signal the attempt to make sense of human Being-in-the-World: it is the motivating factor simultaneously justifying the existence of the thesis itself.

In all these dimensions, the issue of history looms excessively large. It is, in fact, unavoidable. Indeed, as a geo-historical categorisation in planetary time the Anthropocene leads us directly to the question of history. As such, given the paucity of

reflection on history as an existential issue in its own right (especially in relation to the Anthropocene), the thesis seeks to focus upon it in a different way. That is, not merely on the conventional question of history's meaning, or what our contemporary situation means historically (this way of posing the question instantly cedes authority to historical comprehension, accepting the idea that history has an inherent capacity to tell us who, what, where and why we are the way we are), but *what the Anthropocene suggests about the very idea of 'history' itself*: i.e. its legitimacy, utility, veracity; its existential implications for human survival. Asking about history in this sense doesn't mean assuming it is a natural phenomenon, but means seeing it as the dominant technology or machine for producing existential order. Hence it means questioning – particularly now, when history is looked to for guidance in a chaotically fluctuating world – what this technology has done, is doing, in and to the world.

Conventionally, history takes precedence over and dominates human thinking because it concerns what came before. 'History' here involves not just historical action, i.e. 'what happens', but also historical knowledge as a technical construct produced by the disciplinary machine: i.e. the retrospective, historical sense made of what happens, the attempt to comprehend what happens in historical terms, in terms of what already happened. Adept at identifying sufficient reasons and causes in the mass of antecedent historical happenings, the technology is highly adaptable. Any hint of historical incomprehension caused by an actually unprecedented occurrence, and the technology quickly finds a *cause* or 'precedent' for it, placing it within a larger 'process' (e.g. the Anthropocene is always said to be the result of a 'long history'). It thus dulls the immediate sensation of crisis, alleviating the awareness of nonsensical criminality being inflicted upon the world, and which ought in reality to induce the severest apprehension. With people resorting to it to make sense of what happens, it has an incarcerating

existential effect: retaining people within inherited structures of historical sense (now made redundant through the destructive changes wrought by historical action) that guide their interpretation of reality and hence foreclose on the possibility of a more viable future. This is especially so in respect to the current climatic crisis.

Further, drawing on notions of historical identity, people wield history to engage in psychopathological urges to deny people their right to historically exist (e.g. the nearly successful genocide of European Jewry; the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar) or to dominate and dismiss them in other ways. Affectively, then, it has a bearing on how people experience the world, not just on how they behave within it. What happened before has a direct bearing on what happens now, to the extent that historical tensions and apprehensions are everywhere being played out in real time, further exacerbated by a constant diet of historical knowledge encouraging everyone everywhere to look to the past.

The Anthropocene represents most significantly yet another incarcerating *historicization*. This describes a cognitive procedure whereby the world keeps historicizing itself, thereby contributing to its own redundancy by turning itself into history. As a periodisation in planetary history, the Anthropocene constitutes another categorical addition to the historical, chronological structure already imposed upon temporal events. In its own way, it begins to consign the entirety of human history itself – not just the present world-arrangement – to the past. Further, as another historicization leaving a ‘phase’ of history behind, it calls into question the plausibility of historical comprehension itself. Unable to verify or vouchsafe the present ideology of historical progression driven on by technological innovation (it can in fact be interpreted as a direct indictment of its failure), the Anthropocene deflates the conventional value placed upon historical knowledge as that which is able to comprehend and manage what is happening,

or to tell us where we might be going. Instead, the historicized world, of which the Anthropocene is further evidence, asks how we are to think about history today, at this conjunction of human and planetary time, during this enormous stratification or rupture in historical consciousness. What shall we understand by it? What work is it doing in the world?

Here, the question is what the Anthropocene means for history and what history means for the Anthropocene. Rather than conceiving of history as it is usually conceived – e.g. as an indispensable guide to human action; as a way to avoid past mistakes; as an unimpeachable aid to human self-knowledge; as a means of envisioning a better future – history in the Anthropocene looks more obsolete than ever before, rendering redundant the role history plays historically in human cognition, and hence in its redundancy now poses as an existential liability. The implication is that we need to drop the idea of some cohesive sense in human history that historical knowledge merely reflects, as well as the idea that there exists some congruence or compatibility between history and human experience that simply isn't there.

In short, this thesis is intended as a contribution to the question of human meaning in a world awash with history; a historicized world that has the capacity to historically supersede itself; that takes history to be commensurate with human self-comprehension. That this question of human meaning can – not least due to historicization itself – only ever produce provisional answers is because the world doesn't stay the same. It resorts not to history's categorical coordinators to try and invest it with a sense derived from what happened before (a sense which the technology itself implanted) but to philosophical reflection that concentrates on what it is to be in the world as it exists: a situation Walter Benjamin describes as having a 'unique existence in the place where it

is now.’¹ In this way it stands as an attempt to circumvent the inherent inadequacy of historical thinking, which is proficient only at saying how things got to be the way they historically are.

Responses in the academic literature

According to the Leicester geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, the lead researcher of the Anthropocene Working Group, ‘in science, if something is real, if something is a distinct phenomenon, we tend to give it a name.’² The inception of the name itself occurred when Crutzen and Stoermer concluded, after detailing the global scale of the impacts caused by human activity, that ‘it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘anthropocene’ for the current geological epoch.’³ The term has since inspired a wide variety of books and articles across a plethora of academic disciplines. Further, attesting to its extension beyond the confines of academia, it has also appeared prominently in popular media such as *The Economist*, *The National Geographic*, *Jacobin*, *The New York Times*, *Boston Review*, and *Public Books*, where in some of which, as so often today, the term is largely averred without question.⁴ It is declared that humankind ‘has become a global geological force in its own right’; i.e. that the forces changing the planet are now to a very significant degree anthropogenic, in particular since the inception of the Industrial Revolution from

¹ Benjamin, W. ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *One-way Street and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 231.

² Zhorov, I. ‘The Anthropocene: geologists take up the question of a new epoch’, in *Newsworks* October 21st 2016. Accessed November 10th 2016. <http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/thepulse/item/98145-the-anthropocene-geologists-take-up-the-question-of-a-new-epoch>

³ Crutzen, P. J. & Stoermer, E. F. ‘The ‘Anthropocene’’, *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000), pp. 17–18.

⁴ Heise, U. ‘Encounters with the Thing Formerly Known as Nature’, in *Public Books*, September 9th 2013. Accessed November 16th 2016. <http://www.publicbooks.org/multigenre/encounters-with-the-thing-formerly-known-as-nature> She remarks that ‘regardless of whether geologists will ultimately validate this hypothesis or not, it [the Anthropocene] has resonated with environmentalist thinkers and writers eager to describe humans’ current uses of nature without invoking worn-out narratives of degradation, decline, and the end of this or that—whether it be places, species, or the natural world itself.’

the late eighteenth century that enabled an exponential increase in the breadth and force of the human reconfiguration of the earth.⁵ The Anthropocene (as the ‘age of man’) hence politically and existentially situates the human species at the centre of global affairs, promoted as such through the ‘switch from a nature-dominated to a human-dominated global environmental system.’⁶ The increasing consensus on this point is posited on the basis of evidence drawn from various disciplines in the geophysical sciences that show human activity radically changing the composition and thus behaviour of the earth’s ecosystems along a variety of metrics, resulting in far-reaching implications for both human and non-human life. These include, among other things, ecological attenuation, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere pollution, and rapid species extinction.⁷

One has only to look for just some of the grisly details of this critical juncture at the yearly ‘State of the Climate’ reports from the American Meteorological Society, and for the accelerating rate of human-induced species extinctions see a recent paper in *Science Advances*.⁸ It has been postulated, and evidenced via graphs that track changes along twelve metrics of the earth system, that a ‘Great Acceleration’ post-1950 in socio-economic trends constitutes a second, more potent ‘stage’ of the Anthropocene along its supposed ‘trajectory’, unprecedented in magnitude and rate.⁹ The fluctuation of these indicators tells us much about how human socio-economic existence in its present forms – including changes in ‘population, economic growth, resource use, urbanization,

⁵ Steffen, W., Grinevald, J., Crutzen, P. *et al.*, ‘The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives’, in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* Vol. 369, Issue 1938 (2011) p. 843.

⁶ Palsson, G., Szerszynski, B., Sörlin, S. *et al.*, ‘Reconceptualizing the ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene: Integrating the social sciences and humanities in global environmental change research’, in *Environmental Science and Policy* Vol. 28, (2013), pp. 3-13.

⁷ See Maslin, M. A. & Lewis, S. L. ‘Defining the Anthropocene’, in *Nature* Vol. 519 (2015), pp. 171-180; G. Garrard, *et al.*, ‘Introduction: Imagining Anew: Challenges of Representing the Anthropocene’, in *Environmental Humanities* Vol. 5 (2014), pp.149-153.

⁸ Ceballos, G., Ehrlich, P. R. *et al.* ‘Accelerated modern human-induced species losses: Entering the sixth mass extinction’, in *Science Advances* Vol. 1, No. 5 (2015).

⁹ Steffen, W., Broadgate, W., Deutsch, L. *et al.*, ‘The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration’, in *The Anthropocene Review* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2015) p. 82.

globalization, transport and communication’ – fundamentally influence and contribute to ‘atmospheric composition, stratospheric ozone, the climate system, the water and nitrogen cycles, marine ecosystems, land systems, tropical forests and terrestrial biosphere degradation.’¹⁰

The inferences drawn from the data are wholly negative. In a chapter on the Anthropocene in *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*, a tract on economic development and sustainability, Jeffrey Sachs discusses not only the developments in human technology that have contributed to the present ecological crisis, but notes also the simultaneous occurrence of the pressures they bring. Environmental degradation is rarely caused by a single factor, and nor are the subsequent effects incurred isolated to one particular area of life. For example, species extinction has ramifications far beyond the unfortunates who perish to affect those still living.¹¹ This includes feedbacks upon human populations (often already impoverished) living in increasingly precarious coastal locations, vulnerable to rising sea levels and subject to ever more aggressive climate systems that unleash devastating weather events. Ultimately, although couched in the appropriative language of sustainability, his analysis suggests that the (now ironic) triumph of being able to appropriate the ‘Earth’s services’ to such an extent may prove self-defeating, as ‘our age might well carry the transitory successes of industrialization to the point of global ecological collapse.’¹² This can be adduced from the weight of demand on the earth system. For example, humans ‘now consume almost 25 percent of the Earth’s *total biological productivity*.’¹³ Moreover, the combined weight of the technological infrastructure and waste deposits accrued throughout human existence has

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

¹¹ Sachs, J. *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 74.

¹² Ibid., pp. 80-81.

¹³ Aitken, D. W. ‘Global Warming, Rapid Climate Change, and Renewable Energy’, in Crist, E. & Rinker, H. B. (eds.) *Gaia in Turmoil* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 145.

been estimated at thirty trillion tonnes – this ‘technomass’ would hence exceed the total mass of the biosphere.¹⁴

These seem irremediable developments, not only because a complete overhaul of malpracticing global capitalism is unlikely (economic and political interests being fundamentally intertwined), but also because global warming is now well under way, thanks to desultory political efforts to amend the situation. Our less than adequate efforts to do so are caused by psychological barriers to action in the form of our limited cognition. These include environmental numbness (‘a dangerous phenomenon isn’t salient because it isn’t causing any immediate personal difficulties’); optimism bias; discounting (‘our tendency to undervalue distant and future risks’); and of course world views and systems adverse to behavioural change, including free-market capitalism which presumes the right to exploit natural resources exponentially.¹⁵ An observable contradiction hereby emerges. There is on the one hand the fragility inherent to the economic system as the result of an interdependent global market economy that renders its inhabitants vulnerable when it breaks down; while on the other is a sense of the human species as wildly out of control – an unstoppable excrescence enveloping the entire biosphere. Moreover, even as we become more vulnerable we are still increasing in size. Hence a (perhaps crude) comparison with cancer, which is standardly caused by imbalances within multicellular organisms. Metastasising cancer disrupts the ecological functions of its host and can expect death in return once the resources of the host are exhausted. It is pathological by nature. Evading programmed cell death (apoptosis), cancerous cells depart from their assigned roles and seek their own benefit at the expense of their ecosystem, simultaneously consuming and polluting it. Cancer effectively cheats

¹⁴ Zalasiewicz, J. *et al.* ‘Scale and diversity of the physical technosphere: A geological perspective’, in *The Anthropocene Review*, Special Issue (2016), pp. 1-14.

¹⁵ Gifford, R. ‘The Road to Climate Hell’, in *New Scientist* Vol. 227, No. 3029, pp. 28-34.

its way out of cellular cooperation. It does so by breaking the behavioural rules for fitness on which multicellular organisms depend for proper development and maintenance, a hazard common to the majority of existing life forms.¹⁶

Reflecting the priorities of popular opinion, prejudiced media coverage, and perhaps part of the explanation for the indolent international reform of energy policy, recent Pew Research Center polls have found that economic instability and religious militancy are still of greater concern than climate change in wealthier countries. For areas where the consequences of climate change are visceral and directly experienced, the converse is true.¹⁷ Hence it appears that the very psychological propensities that make action so difficult in the first place are exacerbated when there are competing concerns that seem to present far greater immediate personal, political, and economic risk. Certainly, the lack of adequate action and the present evidence suggests at least this much: ‘if our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure... to work out new ways to live with the Earth, to rework ourselves... We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all.’¹⁸ As a brief example, reforming habitual social practices of transportation would require major infrastructural shifts in urban design, otherwise ‘carbon-intensive’ vehicles will ‘continue to ‘make sense’ to publics chiefly because of the way they are immersed in a whole series of interconnected patterns of routine social behavior and structures of everyday knowledge.’¹⁹ Essentially this means that our modes of thought are deeply immersed in the practices that express them and the practices themselves affirm the modes of thought that configure them.

¹⁶ See Aktipis, C. A. *et al.*, ‘Cancer across the tree of life: cooperation and cheating in multicellularity’, in *Philosophical Transactions B*, Vol. 370, Issue 1673 (2015).

¹⁷ Wike, R. ‘What the world thinks about climate change in 7 graphs’. Pew Research Center, April 18th 2016. Accessed November 21st 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/18/what-the-world-thinks-about-climate-change-in-7-charts/>

¹⁸ Plumwood, V. Review of Deborah Bird Rose’s ‘Reports From a Wild Country’, in *Australian Humanities Review* Vol. 42 (2007), p. 1.

¹⁹ Skillington, T. ‘Theorizing the Anthropocene’, in *European Journal of Social Theory* Vol. 18 (2015), pp. 230-31.

Nineteen years on since its postulation, the majority of the Anthropocene Working Group (formed in 2009 to investigate its scientific valence) is of the opinion that the Anthropocene ‘is geologically real’, and that ‘the phenomenon is of sufficient scale to be considered as part of the International Chronostratigraphic Chart, more commonly known as the Geological Time Scale.’²⁰ To illustrate the comprehensive sweep of the term itself, it has thus far been commonly used to:

Denote the present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities. These include changes in: erosion and sediment transport associated with a variety of anthropogenic processes, including colonization, agriculture, urbanization and global warming; the chemical composition of the atmosphere, oceans and soils, with significant anthropogenic perturbations of the cycles of elements such as carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and various metals; environmental conditions generated by these perturbations, these include global warming, ocean acidification and spreading oceanic ‘dead zones’; the biosphere both on land and in the sea, as a result of habitat loss, predation, species invasions and the physical and chemical changes noted above.²¹

The scope imputed to the concept is notable here, encompassing virtually every observable and measurable anthropogenic imprint. Moreover, the formal assignation of the Anthropocene would recognise that ‘these and related processes have left an array of signals in recent strata, including plastic, aluminium and concrete particles, artificial radionuclides, changes to carbon and nitrogen isotope patterns, fly ash particles, and a variety of fossilizable biological remains. Many of these signals will leave a permanent record in the Earth’s strata.’²² As of August 2016, the Working Group recommends that the time interval of the Anthropocene be assigned to the Geological Time Scale as an

²⁰ University of Leicester Press Office, Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), August 29th 2016. Accessed November 10th 2016. <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2016/august/media-note-anthropocene-working-group-awg>

²¹ ‘Working Group on the Anthropocene’, *Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy*. Accessed November 10th 2016. <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/>

²² Media Note: (AWG).

additional geochronologic unit called an epoch; an epoch being shorter in scale compared to a period or era, but longer in scale compared to an age, which, like an epoch, acts as a subdivision within a longer time interval. So although the formalisation of the Anthropocene would constitute the nominal termination of the 11,700-year Holocene Epoch, it would itself be an epoch within the Quaternary Period and Cenozoic Era. Therefore, ‘in such a step, and in common with all other geological time units, the Anthropocene would comprise both a ‘pure time’ unit (an Anthropocene Epoch) and an equivalent unit of strata (an Anthropocene Series).’²³ Furthermore, the opinion of the Working Group converges on the mid-20th century as the most plausible starting point: ‘substantial and approximately globally synchronous changes to the Earth System most clearly intensified in the ‘Great Acceleration’ of the mid-20th century. The mid-20th century also coincides with the clearest and most distinctive array of signals imprinted upon recently deposited strata.’²⁴

But in order to receive official sanction, a formal proposal on its behalf would require approval at several stages, beginning with the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy. Here, the proposal ‘would need to receive a supermajority – 60% support – in a vote by members of the Quaternary Subcommittee. Then it would need to reach the same margin in a second vote by the leadership of the full ICS [International Commission on Stratigraphy], which includes chairs from groups that study the major time blocks. Finally, the executive committee of the International Union of Geological Sciences must approve the request.’²⁵ However, to be in a position to submit such a proposal, the Anthropocene Working Group can expect to be engaged in further years of research, since its members would need to identify and agree upon a potential GSSP

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Monastersky, R. ‘Anthropocene: The human age’, in *Nature* Vol. 519 Issue 7542, March 11th 2015. Accessed November 10th 2016. <http://www.nature.com/news/anthropocene-the-human-age-1.17085>

(Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point) or ‘golden spike’ that would mark out the beginning of the Anthropocene. This consists in a ‘physical reference point in strata at one carefully selected place’, the most common method used to determine geological units of time and therefore preferable to nominating a specific date in time, or Global Standard Stratigraphic Age.²⁶ Looking to be in a position to offer a formal proposal to the Subcommittee, the task of the Working Group will henceforward be to collect evidence that will supply a sufficient and convincing basis for its acceptance. This will be done by selecting ‘sites for sampling and further analysis, to provide full descriptions of relevant signals in the strata, a process that we hope will lead to the identification of one or more suitable candidate sites for a GSSP. We would hope to complete this process over the next 2-3 years.’²⁷

The lack of formal accreditation gives the concept little scientific utility, and in most cases, we might expect a hypothesis of this kind to receive little recognition inside the scientific community – let alone outside of it – until it is validated to the furthest possible extent. This effort is under way, but faces considerable uncertainty: not necessarily as to whether humans will leave geologic signatures (it appears that they will), but where to situate ‘a global marker for a new epoch.’²⁸ Yet the publicity and support with which the Anthropocene has been lauded, often failing to mention its hypothetical status, is suggestive of its resonance in regard to environmental urgencies. Indeed, the Anthropocene is described as nothing less than a ‘global political phenomenon’; as possessing real ramifications for politics, for the organisation of everyday life, because the earth is now ‘an integrated, interdependent system transformed by the interplay of

²⁶ Media note: (AWG).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Zalasiewicz, J. ‘A History in Layers: What mark will we leave on the planet?’, in *Scientific American* Vol. 315, No. 3 (2016), pp. 30-37.

human and non-human agency.’²⁹ The concept is clearly representative of a desire to give voice to contemporary ecological strife by means of a concept extensive enough to have purchase upon heterogeneous ecological and environmental developments, and be able to extrapolate from that current situation to give a sense of what to expect in the future. On such a view, it hereby might act as a fulcrum on which a higher level of ecological consciousness could be attained.

But the concept has been criticised by those who work in geological stratigraphy precisely because it seems more political than scientific in substance. Autin and Holbrook argue that ‘because the strata anticipated by the Anthropocene has not yet fully developed and it is only currently possible that a recognizable basal boundary separates it from the Holocene epoch, researchers should find difficulty in using this concept in stratigraphic practice.’³⁰ They strike a sceptical tone: ‘the suggestion that the concept can be validated with a global stratigraphic marker is at best a bit premature. A distinct stratigraphic marker should have been forming since anthropogenic change began. As practicing stratigraphers, we are taken aback by the claim that scientists currently have sufficient evidence to define a distinctive and lasting imprint of our existence in the geologic record.’³¹ Certainly it is doubtful at this point that sufficient evidence has accumulated that would meet the required standard. With this point in mind, Finney and Edwards likewise wonder ‘whether or not the International Commission on Stratigraphy is being asked to make what is in effect a political statement.’³² For them, the issue is that ‘when we explain the fundamental difference of the Anthropocene from the chronostratigraphic

²⁹ Bierman, F. ‘The Anthropocene: A governance perspective’, in *The Anthropocene Review* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014), pp. 57 & 59.

³⁰ Autin, W. J. & Holbrook, J. M. ‘Is the Anthropocene an issue of stratigraphy or pop culture?’, in *GSA Today* Vol. 22, Issue 7 (2012), pp. 60-61.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Finney, S. C. & Edwards, L. E. ‘The ‘Anthropocene’ epoch: Scientific decision or political statement?’, in *GSA Today* Vol. 26 (2016), pp. 4-10.

units established by the International Commission on Stratigraphy to proponents for its recognition, they often reply that the human impact on the Earth system must be officially recognized, if for no other reason than to make the public and governmental agencies aware of that impact.’³³

It can also be legitimately pointed out that the implied takeover and current supremacy of the human species on the earth is hardly consistent with the fact that ‘natural events in the Earth system can cancel human development.’³⁴ Moreover, surely it is contradictory to consider that while *inside* their own epoch human beings may well wipe themselves out at any moment having already invented their own means of genocidal, suicidal technology in the form of atomic weaponry? Then there is the sheer brevity of the Anthropocene in terms of geologic time: presumably, an ‘age’ or ‘epoch’ of man ought to be imputed only if it signifies something of already considerable duration. As Finney and Edwards point out, if one takes 1945 as the alleged starting point for the Anthropocene (as Zalasiewicz *et al.* have argued³⁵), this would make it a *geologic* time unit spanning barely the ‘duration of one average human life.’³⁶ Other proposed dates of inception, such as 1610 and 1784, hardly improve this situation and display an arbitrariness seemingly endogenous to the whole exercise. Indeed, McNeill and Engelke remark that ‘depending on the criteria one wishes to emphasize, one can find reasons to date the Anthropocene to 1610, 1492, some 7,000 years ago, 12,000 to 15,000 years ago, or back as far as the human control of fire, which might be as much as 1.8 million years ago.’³⁷ In their environmental history of the Anthropocene, they themselves subscribe to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Visconti, G. ‘Anthropocene: Another Academic Invention?’, in *Rend. Fis. Acc. Lincei* Vol. 25 (2014), p. 382. pp. 381-392.

³⁵ Zalasiewicz, J. *et al.* ‘When did the Anthropocene begin? A mid-twentieth century boundary level is stratigraphically optimal’, in *Quaternary International* Vol. 383 (2015), pp. 196-203.

³⁶ Finney & Edwards, ‘The ‘Anthropocene’ epoch’, p. 9.

³⁷ McNeill, J. R. & Engelke, P. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 4.

a much more recent date of inception, 1945, a date endorsed by the Anthropocene's most prominent advocates. It is at least plausible to suspect that, in purely *geological* terms, the state of affairs to which the name 'Anthropocene' might be suited barely appears to be in evidence, hence the term is (at least at this point in time) conceivably misapplied. If one looks, however, at the sheer range of environmental evidence currently available – for example, recent research estimates that humans consist of 0.01% of the earth's total biomass, yet have wiped 83% of mammals from existence, and 50% of all plant life – then the Anthropocene seems an entirely suitable name; signalling simultaneously the overweening power we wield over most forms of life and our 'insignificance' relative to the biomass of (e.g.) plants (82% of biomass) and bacteria (13% of biomass).³⁸

One might think such arguments over the scientific legitimacy of the term – since humanities scholars can't comment competently either way – would be left to the scientists. Nevertheless, there have been concerted efforts in the humanities to examine and critique the Anthropocene on conceptual and political grounds. So much so, that McKenzie Wark wonders: 'what's the compulsion of humanities scholars... to want to refuse this name we did not coin?' He suggests that 'it's galling to have to admit that the relevant data here comes from without, from other ways of knowing, which bring with them other ways of naming, and other conventions about who has the right to name.'³⁹ Certainly the Anthropocene is at odds with the 'post-human' predilections of many humanities scholars. As Clive Hamilton notes, the Nietzschean idea that there is no special significance to human existence sits uncomfortably with our present status in the Anthropocene as a 'unique creature with astonishing power'.⁴⁰ It seems to herald a new

³⁸ Bar-On, Y. M., Phillips, R., and Milo, R., 'The biomass distribution on Earth', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, May 21, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1711842115>

³⁹ Wark, M. *General Intellects: Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century* p. 274.

⁴⁰ Hamilton, C. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 117.

humanism, for even insofar as it renders ‘inescapable the fact of our deep connections with natural processes’, it concurrently is ‘the most striking proof that humans do occupy a position separate from nature’. Hence, ‘contrary to the post-humanist stance, accepting the science of the Anthropocene entails accepting the unique and extraordinary power of humans to influence... the future course of the Earth’.⁴¹ In this sense, Hamilton is at odds with reflections on the Anthropocene by post-humanists, who resist the idea of human uniqueness and redistribute agency to objects while downplaying the extent to which humans are autonomous actors. For this camp, the Anthropocene is simply confirmation that humans were never separate from nature at all. The hubris of humanism is finally, conclusively, exposed. In truth, it seems more prudent to accept that humans have – unquestionably – a technologically-based significance that cannot truthfully be denied, based on cognitive abilities that only we display; yet which at the same time rent apart the ecological conditions that make life possible for so many species, including our own. It is this central ambiguity that makes the Anthropocene so intriguing.

The Anthropocene can potentially be taken to offer (even though the word itself is not subversive but descriptive in form) a more nuanced, up-to-date perspective on our species-existence: on how we are both connected to and refashioning the environment here, where we are now. This is where the humanities, possessed of colossal swathes of brainpower largely devoted to squabbling over historical minutiae, are supposed to intervene: to investigate the extent of its value and its power to enlighten. For the humanities are in principle concerned with the operation, plausibility, and effects of various conceptual, ideational structures that inform our existence, offering reflection, criticism, and proposals for change.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 89.

Part of the attraction of the new gap in our thinking – this tear in the fabric of human progress – that opens up with the emergence of the Anthropocene is that it is well credentialed, backed by a scientific chorus of voices that lend it credibility based upon empirical evidence from climate science; is of relevance to the already flourishing studies of environmental philosophy and history as well as ecocriticism; and, perhaps most important, appeals to more recent shifts in enquiry by addressing the non-human world and our contemporary modes of existence. That is, ‘in the context of the Anthropocene, we no longer have the luxury of imagining humanness and culture as distinctly separate from nature, matter, and worldliness.’⁴² It is thus of particular relevance within the burgeoning interdisciplinary approach of the environmental humanities, which recognises that ‘the ecological crisis is not only a crisis of the physical environment but also a crisis of the cultural and social environment.’⁴³ In short we come back, as so often, to the question of what it is, and what it could and should be, to be human: in particular, to be human in a world which reflects what we have, so far, made of ourselves; what we have turned ourselves and the rest of the world into. As has been remarked, ‘the Anthropocene unmakes the idea of the unlimited, autonomous human and calls for a radical re-working of a great deal of what we thought we knew about ourselves.’⁴⁴

But some are unhappy with the ethical and political implications of the word itself, suggestive as it is of an ecological crisis carried out by an entire species when in reality responsibility rests upon a far more specific type of consumer culture of very recent origin. It has been noted in this regard that ‘the fossil economy was not created nor is it

⁴² Neimanis, A. *et al.* ‘Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene’, in *Ethics and the Environment* Vol. 20 (2015), pp. 67-97.

⁴³ Bergthaller, H. *et al.* ‘Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities’, in *Environmental Humanities* Vol. 5 (2014), p. 262. pp. 261-276.

⁴⁴ Rose, D. B. ‘Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities’, in *Environmental Humanities* Vol. 1 (2012), p. 3. pp. 1-5.

upheld by humankind in general.’⁴⁵ Rather, the globalised neoliberal ideology behind the fossil economy is perpetuated by a small number of powerful individuals and corporations keen to see ‘business-as-usual’, not some ‘universal species agent.’⁴⁶ The ‘Anthropocene narrative’, these authors remark, induces the belief that ecological crisis is the outcome of a gradual ascension (‘a path’) to dominance of the entire human species due to developmental abilities/drivers (the manipulation of fire; the rise of agriculture; the steam engine) acquired during our evolution. This narrative, they claim, is inimical to action, ignoring as it does the contingencies that go into creating and entrenching social relations of power that are in fact produced and maintained by relatively small and potentially vulnerable cliques.⁴⁷ That human nature was always inherently disposed towards this outcome is a fiction constructed by the sense of inevitability generated by the Anthropocene narrative itself.

Eileen Crist takes an even more critical tone: ‘the Anthropocene discourse delivers a familiar anthropocentric credo’, still ‘cloistered in a humanistic mindset’, which ultimately revolves around a concept that ‘crystallizes human dominion.’⁴⁸ The Anthropocene as a conception neatly sidesteps the core issue of changing the human condition away or out of its current ideological, techno-scientific modes to still see the challenges facing us as remediable within the same old conceptual frameworks which will, as before, continue to ‘serve the human enterprise.’⁴⁹ Thus it is possible to see the entire Anthropocene concept, its discourse and narrative structure, as fully commensurate and compatible with the dominant culture. That culture is in the grip of a powerful

⁴⁵ Malm, A. & Hornborg, A. ‘The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative’, in *The Anthropocene Review* Vol. 1 (2014), p. 62. pp. 62-9.

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 66-67.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 64-65.

⁴⁸ Crist, E. ‘On the Poverty of our Nomenclature’, in *Environmental Humanities* Vol. 3 (2013), pp. 140-41. pp. 129-147.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 135.

delusion: i.e. that it can, in keeping with its own sense of importance and indispensability, manage and project itself into the future largely as it is, governed by the same technology and politics which have brought ecological ruin, and requires us only to undertake ‘technological and managerial’ tasks to further entrench the human administration of things.⁵⁰ The problem is that only either an extremely risky attempt at geoengineering to extract excess carbon out of the atmosphere (the technocratic, managerial solution), or a radical reallocation and restructuring of the economic system away from fossil fuels – which is likely only to be prompted by an extremely calamitous series of events in highly developed nations – would mitigate the global crisis.

Astutely, it has been pointed out that the Anthropocene also signifies a ‘spiraling aporia’ in which Western science and technology, far from implying a greater capacity for human control and centrality, in actuality induce feedbacks which usher in a creeping vulnerability, even as human technological prowess apparently increases over what it encounters and refashions in its own interest.⁵¹ Further, and in a contradictory fashion, although the Anthropocene epoch as proposed undoubtedly ‘endorses anthropocentrism’, through its use of geological time-spans it at the same time ‘calls the centrality of the human into question’ by positing the likely (in fact certain) disappearance of the human in due course: epochs, including humanly contrived and operated ones, obviously do not last forever.⁵² As an intellectual prosthetic, then, the Anthropocene only appears to work conceptually and to persist materially through the sheer scale of the human ‘tech-anthropocentric imprint.’⁵³ It should be noted, of course, that the very capacity for technology (the technosphere) that made so efficacious our colonisation of the earth is now relied

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 134.

⁵¹ Ziarek, K. ‘The Limits of Life’, in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* Vol. 16 (2011), p. 20. pp. 19-30.

⁵² Ibid. p. 20.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 29.

upon in order to save us and the world it transformed – a dubious and remarkably confident estimation of both it and our capacity to apply it wisely.

A different approach of radical critique (through what have been called critical ecologies) behooves us to instead recognise that ‘the environmental crises we currently face will require us to rethink some of our fundamental sociopolitical institutions.’⁵⁴ This goes beyond the usual reform-minded rubrics of sustainable development and ecological modernisation and seeks to overturn entirely the presumptions of the anthropocentric mindset where possible, including our relationship to science and technology which can hardly be said to be one of ownership by ‘us’ over ‘it’. Thus the Anthropocene leaves things, from a human perspective, uncomfortably open and not a little unpleasant. It is not a redemptive story. Its consequences are unclear. Would human beings ever again attain the dizzying heights of a previous ‘golden’ age? What does the future in the Anthropocene amount to? If we survive for a considerable amount of time, would future generations look back resentfully, baffled at the halcyon days of unabated consumption of which they were deprived and the consequences of which they must face? Will this early/late(?) ‘stage’ of the Anthropocene pass into history as the age of idiocy and its tenants as credulous fools?

Bruno Latour argues that as a concept, ‘the Anthropocene offers a powerful way, if used wisely, to avoid the danger of naturalization while ensuring that the former domain of the social, or that of the human, is reconfigured as being the land of the Earthlings or of the Earthbound.’⁵⁵ It may thus ‘direct our attention toward the end of what Whitehead called ‘the bifurcation of nature’, or the final rejection of the separation between Nature

⁵⁴ Biro, *Critical Ecologies*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Latour, B. ‘Telling friends from foes in the time of the Anthropocene’, in C. Hamilton *et al.* (eds.) *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 145-46.

and Human that has paralysed science and politics since the dawn of modernism.’⁵⁶ In Liotta and Shearer’s apocalyptic opinion, however, the spectacle of human extinction looms large as the ‘vicious cycle’ of anthropogenic climate change will in turn fatally deplete the ‘human ability to act, adapt, or respond’. So they entertain ‘an even darker proposition’: ‘to consider whether we have entered the ‘late’ stage of the Anthropocene – when by our own actions, we have determined, if not sealed, our own fate.’⁵⁷ They remark, quoting Churchill, that ‘we may have well reached ‘the end of the beginning’ in the transition from the Anthropocene to the ‘Gaiacene.’’⁵⁸ Here one imagines the initial grandeur of the ‘Anthropocene Epoch’ petering out in a squalid fight over increasingly limited resources.

One can imagine, too, the Anthropocene as having, in the end, very little if any impact or importance for the lives of most people, or upon how they conceive of themselves. If it enters common parlance, it might be to affirm a vague ‘dominance’ at a species level that will amuse because this triumphal image will be utterly divorced from the experience of many people; existing, as most do, at the behest of economic and political forces they barely have time to comprehend and even less ability to resist. In this subjective, personal sense, the Anthropocene merely heightens the individual preoccupation with death: directly associating it with what cannot be technologically evaded or intellectually resolved. Exemplifying this feeling, honed in Iraq as a deployed soldier becoming intimately attuned with the prospect of his own demise, Roy Scranton urges we come to terms with death in its broadest sense – that is, individually, culturally, ideologically. For him the central issue of the Anthropocene is how to let the world as we have known it go – finally and forever. He sees philosophy as the attempt to learn how to die. Hence,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Liotta, P. H. & Shearer, A. W. *Gaia’s Revenge: Climate Change and Humanity’s Loss* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007), pp. 140-41.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 157.

having entered ‘humanity’s most philosophical age’, in which the imminence of death is felt all the more acutely, the issue is ‘to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization’.⁵⁹ As he rightly says, ‘the conceptual and existential problems the Anthropocene poses are precisely those that have always been at the heart of humanistic inquiry: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live? What is truth? ... In the world of the Anthropocene, the question of individual mortality – What does my life mean in the face of death? – is universalized and framed in scales that boggle the imagination.’⁶⁰ These questions it raises anew are pressing on a scale and with an urgency never before experienced.

It is these sorts of philosophical issues that in part motivate the present enquiry. It addresses a diagnosis to which earth and climate sciences have been attempting to attune us: a situation in which what worked – temporarily, as it’s transpired – in the interests of human survival has undermined its continued possibility. Necessarily, then, its theme is existential, since that is the theme of our time. Divided into three main sections, I contend in this thesis that the Anthropocene consists in epistemological terms of (1) ‘the mark of the workman impressed on his work’; that it signals in its tautologous structure (2) ‘the metamorphosis of the world into man’; and that it equals (3) ‘a self-incriminating historical predicament’.

With its tautologous structure reflecting the erroneousness of history, and with its conventional recourse to the self-defeating redundancy of historical categorisation, I claim the Anthropocene (as a lived condition as well as a geo-historical classification) culminates in and crystallises a condition *historically antiquated, mentally apprehensive, and existentially incarcerating*. I therefore see the Anthropocene as yet another

⁵⁹ Scranton, R. *Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2015), p. 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

universalising attempt by the human mind to compensate for what Martin L. Davies calls its ‘cognitive inadequacy’ in the face of the estrangement induced by its mode of historical organisation. I argue that the Anthropocene is the latest symptom of the history technology going into overdrive to offset its own redundancy, its inability to adequately compensate for history's nonsensical events. That is, it proffers an apparently comprehensive geo-historical category which ultimately fails either to mask or escape the incomprehensibility of history: namely, the incapacity of historical knowledge and action to elude their unintended effects or anticipate their future repercussions.⁶¹

Statement of Methodology

This thesis draws on a wide variety of literature in philosophy and other disciplines in order to take inspiration from the insights offered therein; elucidate the themes with which it is concerned; and provide support for the intellectual position it sets forth. As such, although lacking in any formal method specific to any particular discipline or school of thought, in its analysis and critique of the Anthropocene as a comprehensive concept (one apparently authoritative yet doomed to inadequacy) it depends in general terms upon ‘eclecticism’ as a means of leveraging support for the main argument. For Diderot (as Martin L. Davies observes), the eclectic philosopher is suspicious of authoritative sounding categorisations, preferring to withhold consent to them and to use their own rational capacities to ask upon what principles they are based. They seek out thinking that helps to formulate their personal perception of reality grounded upon the

⁶¹ The works referred to in this introduction far from exhaust the available literature on the Anthropocene. Many other interesting perspectives on the Anthropocene now exist, approaching it from different theoretical traditions, such as feminism, post-colonial studies, and ethics. For instance, *Anthropocene Feminism*, edited by Grusin, R. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Yusoff, K. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Zylinska, J. *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2014).

immediacy of subjective experience, and from which it derives its manifold sense of urgency.⁶²

No purely scholastic enterprise, the formulation of a philosophical perspective grounded on this fundamental need to understand the world demands engagement with those thinkers, past and present, who have sought to do so, and whose writings are temporal instances of the constantly fluctuating relationship between thought and being. In this way, eclecticism demands of intellectual enquiry that it reflect upon the circumstances that confront it, be aware of the values it brings to bear in its observation of those circumstances, and, using the myriad intellectual resources at its disposal (encapsulated in the work of thinkers spanning a diverse range of intellectual perspectives), seek to analyse the conceptual abstractions which concern it without presuming the existence of a unique standpoint from which they can be observed.

More generally, a thesis of this sort could not exist without an initial desire to explore and better understand the precarious reality of which it hopes to be an informed expression. It thus constitutes an attempt to determine – however inadequately – the circumstances the author confronts, and to examine the existing means of comprehension created in response to those circumstances in order to see of what use they may or may not serve in illuminating it. It therefore depends, in the most fundamental sense, upon Kant’s maxim to use one’s own understanding to the fullest possible extent: to ‘dare to know’, regardless of personal inconvenience, and no matter the likelihood of failure.

⁶² Davies, M. L. ‘Introduction’, in (ed.) *Thinking About the Enlightenment: Modernity and its Ramifications* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 22-23.

1. *'The mark of the workman impressed on his work'*

Language foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the immediate deliverances of experience. The result is that we imagine that we have immediate experience of a world with perfectly defined objects implicated in perfectly defined events...

A. N. Whitehead¹

This thesis is principally concerned with what I later describe as the crisis of historical comprehension the Anthropocene induces, aiming to investigate the current horizon of thought under the cloud of ecological breakdown. It highlights its frightening, invalidating impact upon human understanding, upon historical knowledge as the dominant means of human orientation in a world which nevertheless keeps superseding it.

But one cannot talk about sense, or its lack, without reference to knowledge, since for self-reflective beings the coincidence of mind and world produces a central conundrum: how can the mind know the world, what sort of knowledge can be gained of it, and on what basis do we declare it knowledge? Hence, in focusing upon the question of knowledge, my purpose in this chapter is to set the groundwork for my later reflections on the Anthropocene in relation to identity (chapter 2), and history (chapter 3). As per the thesis title, my aim is to build up a picture of the 'sense of history' in the Anthropocene that rests upon the actual material and intellectual conditions in which this geo-historical categorisation occurs; to demonstrate, ultimately, what I call the *retrospective redundancy* it entails in respect to our knowledge, identity, and forms of historical understanding.

¹ Lowe, V. *Alfred North Whitehead: The Man and His Work Vol. 2: 1910 – 1947* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 96.

Undoubtedly, the Anthropocene depends on the possibility of knowledge. It is positioned as knowledge, and in it we face a problem of what to do with it *as* knowledge. In symbolic terms, it marks a rearrangement of planetary history, but in epistemic terms it therefore calls into question the conditions of knowledge today. It incites one to wonder whether these conditions are conducive to, or destructive of, our means of knowing. Here the human species is required to confront its predominant global position and the disturbing, isolating consequences of its collective existential agency, its forced self-encounter. In epistemic terms, through the symbol of the Anthropocene as the self-appointed ‘mark of the workman impressed on his work’, the human species and the world it has created becomes an object of reflection for itself at a *comprehensive* and *universal* level of symbolic abstraction. Through the Anthropocene, I suggest, it simultaneously promotes and demotes itself on a planetary scale.

To this extent, any contemplation of the Anthropocene requires me to take the world I hold in my mind, the world that seems to me quite ordinary, and which I observe from a non-special position, and try to see it from a different perspective altogether. This isn’t a perspectival approach that grants each person’s perspective equal value, but an attempt that eliminates, so far as this is possible or impossible, my wishes, desires, and hopes about the world, and urges me to see it from a different place – a place beyond my spatio-temporal location; a place that neither contains nor requires my presence. That is, from the future: from a world without me. In so doing, I try to envision or imagine what bearing this future perspective has, or might have, on my understanding of the present. This strikes me as the key ‘use’ of the Anthropocene concept today to the degree that it might help us grasp our situation in relation to a future whose form is being made subject, even subordinate, to the collective activities of humankind today.

In this sense, the Anthropocene prompts the very old question of what I think I know, and whether what I think I know can count any longer as knowledge. Here it becomes discouraging to think that there might be a very deep difference – a disconcerting epistemic gap – between what I think I know and knowledge itself. Intensifying the worry – i.e. of to what extent I am passing off opinion as knowledge, or speculation as understanding – is the fact that the world that seemed to me to be a certain way now appears to lack the features I thought it had, and is increasingly absent of the possibilities I assumed it provided. To the degree that this is so, it seems to me that one cannot easily separate what one thinks about the Anthropocene from what one thinks about everything else, since so much of what we think is bound up with ways of perceiving or thinking about the world which the Anthropocene either directly invalidates, antiquates, or otherwise calls into serious question.

Knowledge as ontological refinement

Knowledge has long been the foremost concern of philosophy. To clarify, in ordinary language the word ‘philosophy’ denotes an individuated conception of life comprised of a set of beliefs about the world. When taken together these may trace out and delimit the meaning of life for any human observer. Colloquially, when we refer to a person’s philosophy we mean to denote the ‘world-view’ they project upon the world, which may be fashioned out of a certain sum of core beliefs received into their mind from the places of work and leisure they inhabit. These beliefs mediate their relationship with whatever they encounter by providing a means of interpreting and explaining the experiences that follow. But in terms of what motivates it as an academic practice (which may include a sense of apprehension regarding the organisation of the world or a preoccupation with the elements that go into the construction of it), it etymologically suggests a concern for

the betterment of human life insofar as it is pursuant to wisdom or flourishing. Its ambiguity in meaning derives from changing experiential conditions that infuse human affairs and the methods of enquiring into them with different priorities.

Basic characteristics persist, however: certainly the inception of philosophy depends in the Socratic sense on the question, for the question is antecedent to enquiry. Only in the articulation of questions are we able to give expression to our concerns with how things are the way they are, and whether they should be the way they are. Through the machinations of the intellect philosophy aims to provide us with answers which attempt to address the questions we pose for ourselves, whereby we, as well as the world around us, become a question and a problem to ourselves.

To extend this line of thought, philosophy may refer in a general way to an interrogative activity that is concerned with the validity and status of extant beliefs as claims to knowledge, since it is in the holding of beliefs and in the acting upon them that such things as a 'self' and a 'world' are brought into existence for us. It hence may be engaged in the study and construction of explanations that are advanced as necessary and sufficient to believe in order that there may be established sufficient reasons for things in existence. So, for Dumarsais, the essence of philosophical activity consists in 'a spirit of observation and exactness, which relates everything to true principles.'² To this latter end, its practitioners may regard themselves as truth oriented rather than therapeutic: Quine, for example, considered philosophy to be 'continuous with science'; an extension of the attempt to 'round out 'the system of the world', as Newton put it.'³ Or differently, they may think themselves pragmatically preoccupied with the use of particular beliefs

² Dumarsais, C. C. 'Definition of a *Philosophe*', in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Kramnick, I. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 22.

³ Quine, W. V. O. 'Dialogue with W. V. O. Quine', in Bryan Magee, *Talking Philosophy: Dialogues with Fifteen Leading Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 143.

for particular ends; their verifiable ‘cash value’ for the satisfaction of human pursuits, as William James suggests.⁴

In specialised philosophical discourse it is common for philosophy to be referred to as a kind of ‘discipline’ whose practitioners, by virtue of their training and the time afforded them to think, must generate certain standards by which they know what counts as ‘getting it right, or doing it right’, as emphasised particularly in the analytic tradition.⁵ In this tradition, philosophy is especially concerned with the status of various kinds of knowledge, and makes distinctions between different sorts (e.g. propositional; personal; procedural). Knowledge (know-how) in this sense allows us to accomplish things, to act successfully in and upon the world.

In both ideal and pragmatic terms, then, the acquisition of knowledge is meant to offer something both constructive and liberating. Liberating such that, in addition to the deliverances of reason, it becomes capable of emancipating the mind from dogma and superstition; an inherent good, once acquired, that might better a person’s understanding of the world around them. But scepticism (itself intellectually induced, ironically, by rational reflection pushed to the limits of its endurance) produces an essential misgiving in the philosophically inclined: how can we distinguish knowledge from the pretension to it? Against what standard do we compare the status of our enlightenment? Through what method can we verify the veracity of our ideas? After all, the plurality of human experience and the different sources of information socially in play delivers different perspectives on what counts as knowledge and what doesn’t. Hence, there is a common propensity for people to be mistaken, to be manipulated by rhetoric which dresses up

⁴ James, W. ‘What Pragmatism Means’, in *Selected Papers on Philosophy* (London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1917), p. 203.

⁵ Williams, B. *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 180.

speech in the trappings of incontrovertible truth. Claims to knowledge of questionable validity are everywhere.

Unsurprisingly, then, clarifying in what knowledge consists, and what having it (knowing) would look like, has become an aspiration of central importance for philosophical enquiry. Epistemology, the study of knowledge (or of what knowledge knows), emerges in the dialogues of Plato as distinct from ontology: the study of what exists to be known. As Robert Pasnau puts it in his recent study of certainty and its decline as an epistemic ideal: ‘we care about the theory of knowledge largely because we care about what we ought to believe, and what we ought to do, and we think such questions of belief and agency are tied up with questions about what we know.’⁶ Such is the strength of connection between what we believe we know and how we think and act, that it is incumbent upon us – to whatever degree this is individually possible – to examine on what evidence our claims to knowledge are based.

Yet the situation of knowledge, I think, must be distinguished from its state. That is, the *situation* in which knowing occurs, and that therefore delimits the type and quality of knowledge capable of being known, contrasts with (a) the *cognitive state of the knowing subject* in possession of the knowledge she knows, which is further distinct from (b) the *state of knowledge at large*; which is to say the aggregate amount quantitatively and qualitatively available in the world as a whole. One can be counted as epistemically lucky, for instance, if the world in which one lives contains knowledge benefitting one’s wellbeing – e.g. in a medicinal or technological sense – that was unavailable to earlier agents in history. The same goes for morality: living in a society less punitive, on average, in its methods of punishment, or more permissive in terms of its behavioural mores,

⁶ Pasnau, R. *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 9.

means one counts as luckier in moral terms. Fundamentally, the situation and state of knowledge are closely interrelated. Determining the type, quantity, and quality of what one knows (one's state of knowledge) is the situation of knowledge on which one's state of knowledge depends. That situation delimits, sometimes severely, the horizon of epistemic possibility for any given subject, just as the collective efforts of human agents causes the situation of knowledge to constantly alter.

Knowing is, moreover, a 'world-building activity', Hannah Arendt points out. Crucial to its survival, its ability to adapt to the world around it, the intellect desires to know how things work, to make life intelligible, to become capable of conducting itself to good effect. Yet upon closer inspection, it perceives its cognitive limits. It notices the temporal, often deceptive nature of its perceptions. It rightly suspects there is more in reality than disclosed in its sensory apprehensions of it. So, in aiming to compensate for these limitations, it manufactures specialised conditions – namely laboratory conditions, conditions of technical scrutiny – under which things can be taken apart to see how they work, and thus with its implements of ontological refinement '*force* the non-appearing to appear.'⁷ With its intricate machines intervening to calibrate how things work, to correlate, rank, and distinguish the movements of matter, modern science has hence disclosed to the human mind a greater plenitude of existing objects, made possible an image of the world more extensive than is possible through experience alone, and enabled the manipulation of things on a scale rarely before dreamed. For as Aristotle observes, experience can say only *that* a thing is as it is: without further investigation, it cannot say *why* it is as it, has the features it has, or engages in the behaviour it does.⁸

⁷ Arendt, H. *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1978), pp. 56-57.

⁸ Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p. 690.

In short: isolating, analysing, and thereby increasing its objects of enquiry, knowledge refines the world. The world subsequently reflects its epistemic refinement at every level of analysis. Epistemic refinement enables ontological refinement, and, in principle, this ontological refinement produces a world more and more amenable to knowledge; and hence, to its further instrumentalisation.

Concepts as symbolic, compensatory projections

Language, particularly in a technologically proficient age, gives us the capacity to fashion different descriptions of life which continually pass in and out of existence. This means, however, that there will be more and more to comprehend since this accrual of descriptions continually adds to what existence, and therefore to what our knowledge of it, might mean. Hence the signs we choose to employ matter enormously, as Wittgenstein recognises: ‘the choice of our words is so important, because the point is to hit upon the physiognomy of the thing exactly, because only the exactly aimed thought can lead to the correct track. The car must be placed on the tracks precisely so, so that it can keep rolling correctly.’⁹ The concern here is to do with conceptual function, with the accuracy of the activity of conceptualisation, and the degree to which a symbol aligns or identifies with its referent in a wider semiotic system. Wittgenstein’s comment reveals a common aspiration. Most of the time, in everyday speech, the ‘point’ in choosing to utter certain words is that we think or hope they express what one wants to say; and usually, they do refer accurately enough to the object. The word, on the face of it, strikes smoothly upon its referent and summons that referent into our presence. Hence the immanence of a word lies precisely in this ability to ‘make present’ or imply a certain meaning. Every sign, or concept, is an arrangement of language, and all language has a bearing upon the world

⁹ Wittgenstein, ‘Philosophy’, p. 6.

because it is irrevocably tied to the world insofar as it is tied to us, and we are invariably part of the world. For us, language always implies the world, and hence ourselves as beings in a world constructed by and largely understood with language.

So what we call thinking – e.g. identification, discrimination, classification, deliberation, reflection – cannot occur without language, although there can certainly be thoughts without language. This is so since the comprehension and use of language in the act of thinking, aside from being intrinsic to the performance of everyday life, provides the means through which human beings articulate a host of existential concerns by presenting them in symbolic form. The Anthropocene itself exemplifies the linguistic capacity to mentally form and project a symbolic substitute onto the world, thus enabling the world to be presented back to the human mind in the form the mind desires. Being able to employ a language, a language antecedently arranged into a semiotic system, alters the state and import of our physical situation by endowing us with an extensive lexicon; a conceptual armoury with which we construct our lives and on which our orientation in the world depends. Hence unavoidably, human beings – to their frequent frustration – are language animals.¹⁰ The expressive power of language supplies a capacity to articulate not only who we are, but who we could be. It infuses both the world and the user of words with meaning, bequeathing to us the vocabulary to reflect on our existence.

Natural languages are socially (intersubjectively) generated and regulated by their users to organise and manage their worldly affairs. Hence Barthes calls language a ‘horizon, which implies both a boundary and a perspective; in short, it is the comforting area of an ordered space.’¹¹ Through habitual use, language herds thinking towards

¹⁰ Steiner, G. ‘The Language Animal’, in *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 69.

¹¹ Barthes, R. *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, trans. Lavers, A. & Smith, C. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 11.

certain outcomes and away from others. It is both prescriptive and descriptive; it cajoles and insists; rebukes and reassures. It consists, in its elemental structure, of symbolic components (letters), arranged into words which are used to form sentences and propositions. Words are thence organised into discrete classes and categories, among the most capacious and abstract of which are ‘nature’, ‘culture’, ‘world’, ‘mind’, ‘object’, and ‘time’. Thinking is conducted in this vast discursive space. We are confronted, in language, both with ourselves and with something much more than ourselves: a system of signification, a porous, expanding structure of signs and referents, inferences and meanings. Illustrating this achievement, Rilke poetically expresses the power of cognitive and therefore technological extension in the world that language grants the human species: *le monde est grand, mais en nous il est profond comme la mer* (the world is large, but in us it is deep as the sea).¹²

The subject who symbolically apprehends the world already known to them through routine, who is directed to certain possibilities and habits concerning it, is always a socialised body. They are a body ‘which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.’¹³ The ‘immanent structures’ of the world are generated through the creation, implementation, and use of names (signs) that lend it the semblance of necessary, *a priori* order. Such signs are created in social concert with others, whereby through their appointment they function to construct what to the body becomes the social world ordinarily encountered. That is, as Bourdieu says, ‘by structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of this world, and does so all the more significantly the

¹² Quoted in Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 183.

¹³ Bourdieu, P. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 81.

more widely it is recognized, i.e. authorized.’¹⁴ Barthes claims, moreover, that a sign is ‘the associative total’ of the signifier and the signified.¹⁵ Peirce argues that ‘a *sign* is a thing which serves to convey knowledge of some other thing, which it is said to *stand for* or *represent*. This thing is called the *object* of the sign; the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object, is called an *interpretant* of the sign.’¹⁶ He distinguishes between three different types of sign: ‘icons’, or *likenesses*, which convey through imitation the things which they represent; ‘indices’, or *indications*, which through their physical connection with the object show something about it; and, most relevant for this enquiry, ‘general signs’, or *symbols* which ‘have become associated with their meanings by usage. Such are most words, and phrases.’¹⁷

The Anthropocene would hereby consist in the latter sort of ‘general sign’ or symbol insofar as it amounts to an aggregate or composite of two concepts derived from ancient Greek: ‘anthropos’ (man/human) and ‘cene’ (new). Their conjunction describes a categorical shift away from a previous ontological order into a new, explicitly *human* order of ontological arrangement, of existential habitation. For, ‘etymologically’, Peirce says, *symbol* ‘should mean a thing thrown together... The Greeks used ‘throw together’ very frequently to signify the making of a contract or convention.’¹⁸ Indeed, Aristotle affirms this when he remarks that ‘by noun we mean a sound significant by convention... the limitation ‘by convention’ was introduced because nothing is by nature a noun or name – it is only so when it becomes a symbol.’¹⁹ Therefore, as Peirce argues further, ‘the symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of a symbol-using mind,

¹⁴ Bourdieu, P. *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by J. B. Thompson, trans. G. Raymond & M. Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 105.

¹⁵ Barthes, R. *Mythologies* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 135.

¹⁶ Peirce, C. S. ‘Of Reasoning in General’, in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings Vol. 2 (1893-1913)*, edited by The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 13.

¹⁷ Peirce, ‘What is a Sign?’, in *The Essential Peirce*, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 9.

¹⁹ Aristotle, ‘Of Interpretation’, 16a, p. 40.

without which no such connection would exist.’²⁰ He hereby affirms the inexistence of a logical, necessary bond between sign and object in the absence of the human construction and common agreement concerning such a bond. And so according to Peirce, we ‘think only in signs. These mental signs are of mixed nature; the symbol parts of them are called concepts. If a man makes a new symbol, it is by thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. A symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples.’²¹ A symbol such as ‘marriage’ or ‘bird’, he states, ‘does not, in itself, identify those things... but supposes that we are able to imagine those things, and have associated the word with them.’²² There thus comes to exist a sometimes secure, sometimes tentative, contract between the symbol (that is, the word or concept) and its appointed object by virtue of conventional agreement.

I take our bodies to be our primary means of experiential encounter and hence understanding in the world, but our language is secondary only in the sense that it requires first a succession of human bodies which bring it into and continually renew its existence through the exchange of its symbolic components. This recognises that I am first and foremost a vulnerable physical organism which must negotiate and survive a world of physical things. However, to say that we always ‘live inside the act of discourse’ does not overstate the extent to which our lived experience is something thought, interpreted, and more deeply articulated with language.²³ The use of language gives rise to our dependence upon category thinking, upon classificatory thinking as a method of existential organisation and management. A conceptualisation of greater or lesser abstraction – a symbol or sign that projects and carries (or rather, to which is imputed)

²⁰ Peirce, ‘What is a Sign?’, p. 9.

²¹ Ibid. p. 10.

²² Ibid. p. 9.

²³ Steiner, G. ‘The Retreat from the Word’, in *Language and Silence* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 31.

meaning as its function – is itself a response to the otherwise bewildering flux of lived experience. Like the ever elusive ‘self’ that asserts itself in this swirling mass, this creation of concepts is nothing less, for Paul Valéry, than a stabilising existential imperative; the necessary ‘effect of an incalculable disorder.’²⁴ The disorder of life consists, Virginia Woolf points out, in the multiplicity of experiential impressions received on a day to day basis: ‘examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms.’ Hence, ‘life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged’, but rather ‘a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.’²⁵

Therefore, symbols are a consequence of the cognitive effort to compensate for the baffling heterogeneity of what exists; the frustrating disorder of innumerable and unrelated events happening simultaneously across the globe; the intensity of the array of sensory inputs received from our surrounding environment. Or more precisely, the semiotic system strives to linguistically manage both the multiplicity of ‘that which owes its existence to men’ (that which is anthropogenic in nature), as well as that which does not.²⁶ These consist in what are named as the substances, forms, elements, and objects of the world as these are presented with what would otherwise be of inconceivable variety to the mind. As William James observes:

The world’s contents are *given* to each of us in an order so foreign to our subjective interests that we can hardly by an effort of the imagination picture to ourselves what it is

²⁴ Valéry, P. ‘Fragments From ‘Introduction to the Method of Leonardo Da Vinci’’, in *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1950), p. 93.

²⁵ Woolf, V. ‘Modern Fiction’, in McNeille, A (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 – 1928* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 160.

²⁶ Arendt, H. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 41.

like. We have to break that order altogether, - and by picking out from it the items which concern us, and connecting them with others far away, which we say 'belong' with them, we are able to make out definite threads of sequence and tendency; to foresee particular liabilities and get ready for them; and to enjoy simplicity and harmony in place of what was chaos.²⁷

As he says, the finiteness of the human mind 'obliges it to see but two or three things at a time. If it wishes to take wider sweeps it has to use 'general ideas.'" The cognitive intolerability of chaos means that symbols are born of an obsession with which we are familiar: to attribute meaning (semantics); to capture meaning in time. So 'meaning', George Steiner claims, 'is etymology. Each word comes to us, as we learn and use a language, with a more or less measureless freight of precedent.'²⁸ Our language, for James, hence utterly 'transforms the... 'given' world into an utterly unlike world of sharp differences and hierarchic subordinations for no other reason than to satisfy certain subjective passions we possess.'²⁹ Likewise, in considering the method of philosophy, Wittgenstein declares that 'the philosopher strives to find the liberating word, that is, the word that finally permits us to grasp what up until now has intangibly weighed down our consciousness. The philosopher delivers the word to us with which one can express the thing and render it harmless.'³⁰ New situations, new developments in human affairs, produce this desire for symbols and conceptualisations meaningful to that situation. Symbols expressive of its real character, which would relieve the mind of its apprehension. The desire to exceed the limitations of inherited meaning encourages ideational developments intended to describe what is unprecedented in human experience.

²⁷ James, W. 'Reflex Action and Theism', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1923), p. 118.

²⁸ Steiner, G. *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 119.

²⁹ James, 'Reflex Action and Theism', p. 130.

³⁰ Wittgenstein, 'Philosophy', p. 6.

Aspects of epistemic refinement

Following what has been said, it is evident that the representational possibilities of language ensure a capacity to delimit where we come from, where we are, and what we should do. This (admittedly obvious) point contains a larger truth: that only shared concepts make something like a knowable world possible. Conceptual world-making of either a scientific or socio-political nature traces out the existence of a reality whose plenitude exceeds our immediate apprehension. The coherence of this reality depends on the form of our concepts; to what extent they regiment or make rigid the reality for which they stand. As both templates for and tracings of reality, they might suggest, portray, or pre-empt reality as, for instance, authoritarian, hierarchical, punitive, pluralistic, catastrophic, or contingent in nature. This affects our sense of the possible, whereupon the space of possibility seems to expand or contract, fluctuating in accordance with our preconceptions.

To this extent, the way the world is at various levels of analysis in part depends upon how we represent it. This is to say that what is there in the world becomes an object of our representation insofar as its representation is made possible by the symbolic forms human beings have at their disposal or are able to create anew. Symbolic forms spoken or written sustain a longstanding presumption of symmetry between what human beings do and their representations of what they do; between human life and its self-comprehension. To the extent I assume the world adheres to my representations of it, I may go about my daily business relatively undisturbed. Yet therein lies the problem central to epistemology: to what extent do they, in fact, adhere? After all, what counts as a meaningful, let alone accurate, representation is contested and fraught with difficulty.

Fundamentally, the world can be seen as a composite of the knowledge known about it. The concepts through which knowledge is symbolised refine and coordinate its objects, and the sum-total of the coordinated objects constitutes the world. What the world represents at any given point in time consists of that which can be conceptually expressed. Integral to world-building, the concepts and hence propositions through which knowledge is possible are the predominant means by which human beings conceive of the world and bend it to their will. This is because concepts can, or at least can seem to, represent with reasonable accuracy, and in adequate detail, the ontological form the world has.

By ‘ontological form’, I mean the form the world takes in respect to our understanding of its nature, which derives predominantly from the natural sciences. According to naturalistic explanations (where one dispenses from the start with explanations of a supernatural kind), the *scientific image* of the world and of human beings, as Wilfred Sellars called it, and which has emerged over centuries of incremental scientific experimentation, is made possible by our foundational representations of it, which are not only conceptual but mathematical in form. There is then, by contrast, what I call the ‘existential form’ the world takes in respect to one’s experience of both it and of oneself as a self-reflecting being. Sellars aptly called this the *manifest image* illuminating our everyday lives, in which our image of the world is inextricably bound up with the human intentions, desires, meanings, purposes, and activities with which, and through which, we apprehend it. This image is reflective of our status as social beings who inhabit the world as an operating base through which the satisfaction of individual and collective pursuits – of a moral, social, and political nature – can be met.

In principle, the disjunction between these two sets of representations – scientific/manifest, or ontological/existential – is clear, although in the course of our daily

lives our background awareness of the scientific image and the facts it makes known to us (if they can circumvent the organs of propaganda of the multimedia age) reconstitutes and otherwise informs our thinking in respect to dilemmas of a social and moral nature. Although the scientific image can at its most reliable elucidate the inner structure of worldly objects, the interrelations between them, and even predict their behaviour, it is not nomothetic in respect to our moral and political duties. As Arendt confirms: ‘the questions raised by thinking and which it is in reason’s very nature to raise – questions of meaning – are all unanswerable by common sense and the refinement of it we call science.’³¹ Where thinking excels is in the drawing of distinctions and in the elaboration of perspectives pertaining to areas of life for which science offers no empirical guidance or laws of nature by which we must rigidly abide.

By contrast, far from necessitating scientific approval, or reliant upon a strict evidentiary base, much of our knowledge is acquired in order to successfully navigate social situations on a small and intimate scale: it is knowledge on which we habitually depend to ‘get by’ or ‘get on’ in the world by helping us conform to the behavioural expectations of others or enact certain procedures, such as driving a car or writing a letter. This type of knowledge is derived from what our respective social circles – our inner circle of family, friends, and close confidants, and our wider social circle extending from our places of employment to our places of entertainment – demand that we know regarding in what ways we should think and act in situations that may arise within them. What matters in respect to so much of our knowledge, then, is the degree to which it is socially sanctioned, and therefore helps us to do the things we need to do. Legitimising what we think we know is the ability to cope with the situations we face on an everyday basis. A sudden failure to cope may indicate either an inadequate grasp of what one needs

³¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, pp. 58-9.

to know, or a change in the existential conditions of society such that the knowledge needed to cope with it will bear little to no resemblance to the knowledge one already knows, and which would hence render it, to all intents and purposes, no longer knowledge.

Knowledge is, then, fundamentally relational – it receives its authority and emerges out of a shared, social basis for its dissemination. Relational autonomy similarly holds ‘the conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity.’³² This equally applies to knowledge. Testimony, for instance, is one of the most common means through which knowledge is established and shared, and without which we would find our stock of knowledge extremely limited.

Epistemologist Michael Hannon is therefore right to argue for ‘a deeply social picture of knowledge’, since only ‘a very small part of our knowledge of the world comes to us from our immediate experience.’ Most often, being either unwilling or incapable of investigating the evidentiary base from which an utterance’s or proposition’s status as knowledge derives, ‘we depend on what others have told us.’³³ In evolutionary terms, there is an evident connection between the reliability of knowledge and the human capacity to survive and adapt. As Hannon points out, ‘we are not isolated inquirers: our cognitive competence is a collective achievement that depends on many ordinary individuals who gather and share the informational resources on which human life depends.’³⁴ Hannon illuminates a fundamental relationship between the enquirer and

³² MacKenzie, C. & Stoljar, N. ‘Introduction: Autonomy Reconfigured’, in MacKenzie, C. & Stoljar, N. (eds.) *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

³³ Hannon, M. *What’s the Point of Knowledge?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

informant(s), whereupon, as society diversifies and its sources of knowledge proliferate (and hence the pool of available knowledge gets bigger) there is an increased possibility of not only finding informants, but finding informants who are unreliable.

Identifying informants who are reliable is crucial if we are to avoid being misled. Complicating matters here is the fact that, insofar as an informant appears reliable, we think they possess credible knowledge, and insofar as they appear unreliable, we think they do not possess credible knowledge. But this doesn't necessarily follow: they may have knowledge, yet still be, or appear, unreliable – and vice versa. We may, it seems, run the perpetual risk of trusting informants whose claims to knowledge turn out to be baseless; as can be observed, for instance, in the unscrupulous claims of easily refuted 'chancers' like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, in the politics of European Union membership, or in competing claims about climate change. The ramifications for society, as can be observed throughout history, can be severe. The lesson here must be to work out a way of distinguishing between sophisticated posturing – either of an intellectual or political variety – and credible information. In a 'post-truth' world where charlatans run amok, where the prevalence of 'bullshit' increases in proportion to the lack of regard for appropriate standards of verification, it is ever harder to distinguish between knowledge and the appearance of it. So what matters more than ever is finding reliable informants.

As Harry Frankfurt pointed out years ago, there have always been bullshitters with no regard for the truth of what they say, but care only about whether saying it affords them some advantage or other.³⁵ I would submit bullshitting is a form of egoism behind which lies a desperate need to be socially recognised. It is hardly any surprise, therefore, that we are inundated with bullshit of all kinds; it percolates from the attention-seeking

³⁵ See: Frankfurt, H. G. *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

and the agenda-driven to the detriment of clarity and to the advantage of confusion. Here the normative implications of an utterance – a Kantian concern – pales into insignificance when compared to the immediate benefit of uttering it: i.e. in the hope that it may confer a calculated, cognitive ‘hit’ to the enquirer, appease the powerful, or curry favour with the well-connected.

Our present picture of knowledge, then, looks like a landscape densely populated with all sorts of vegetation, all of which is edible in principle, but only some of which is epistemically nutritious – by which I mean conducive to human species flourishing on an ecological or existential scale. This is, moreover, an epistemic wasteland littered with dead ideas and discredited concepts; with competing ‘zombies’ of an ideational variety which cannot be finally destroyed because of the powerful interests they serve. So they continue to circulate in the social body like viruses, gaining converts and taking up invaluable cognitive space. Today, it seems to me, we have by necessity become acclimated to a time in which what people believe or think they know only rarely – or by accident – conforms to the evidence. With so many competing voices and claims to knowledge, the credence we give to a claim depends less on the evidence supposed to constrain it, and more on how we perceive the claimant: namely, are they of our tribe? And do they know what we know? There is, consequently, less and less grasp of what it would mean to deceive, to be deceptive, because a shared, unequivocal conception of the ‘facts of the matter’ is increasingly impossible to attain, or is confined to small, special interest groups. All this has implications for how successful a concept can become in this ideational marketplace, in which certain ideas are rewarded and others shunned as much for the sake of emotional preference as rational warrantability.

Conditions for symbolic success

There are certain conditions attendant to symbolic success or ideational flourishing in a fickle and perpetually distracted ideational marketplace which I think we can readily identify. ‘Symbol’ is used here as synonymous with ‘concept’ or ‘idea’; as mental constructs that are intended to identify reality and project some form of meaning upon it. Symbolic ‘success’ I define narrowly in terms of its degree of adopted use in language. To this extent, the Anthropocene concept has so far proved to be a successful and persistent ‘replicator’ – but just how harmful or justified or beneficial it has proved we are presently less able to determine given the short span of its existence.

In the sense in which Richard Dawkins employed the term in *The Selfish Gene*, a *replicator* is anything of which copies or imitations are made. The most effective replicators are those that possess qualities such as fecundity, copying-fidelity, and longevity.³⁶ An already given society, its members arranged and guided in their private thoughts and public affairs by a primary set of replicators – e.g. ‘signs’, ‘symbols’, or what can be otherwise described as *primary symbolic imperatives* such as capital, democracy, liberty, consumption, and work – provides an environment conducive to the regular emergence of new replicators insofar as certain conclaves within it (i.e. those academic disciplines – namely economics, philosophy, and politics – which variously produce, affirm, and critique its dominant ideas) strive to comprehend it better, describe its workings more clearly, or seek to replace/update its organisational principles. In so doing, a technologically proficient, informationally saturated society will generate a wide variety of symbols whose success, at least in pragmatic terms, will be measured according to the frequency of their selection: the extent to which they come to occupy human minds and their effect therein; that is, what they incline people to think and do.

³⁶ Brandon, R. N. ‘The Levels of Selection’, in D. L. Hull and M. Ruse (eds.) *The Philosophy of Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 178.

In specialised discourses, however, the extent to which a symbol is successful, or *apt*, is believed to rely on its approximation to something called ‘getting it right’; where this depends upon how far it corresponds with a previously selected set of criteria. Should the view prevail that we *are* gradually getting it right be extant, that we are in proper conformity in our method of investigation, then the progressive injunction within that phrase presumes that we may on occasion declare that, ‘as far as we are at present able to determine, *this* is right’ when a symbol fulfills, in a scientific sense, criteria such as parsimony, replicability, and falsifiability.

However, before this problem emerges, symbols, concepts, and propositions in general must first enter those spaces of specialised vocational investigation where they are put under scrutiny, and this is more difficult than it may at first appear. In its genesis the symbol not only relies upon fortuity in circumstance but its further impression upon the mind if it is not to be crowded out in the incessant flux of thought or dismissed according to stringent discursive procedures. Too inconvenient or untimely, and the idea is banished. Too conformable, and it is easily absorbed to no subsequent effect. The possibility of the eradication of symbols (this may include their elimination by ignorance, hence leading to a lack of distribution) is as much a real possibility as their propagation, since contemporary culture (or ‘liquid modernity’ as Bauman memorably called it) may be said to produce symbolic or ideational instability in three respects, as I suggest below:

- a) ***Linguistic instability*** derives from the contingency of meaning. Because language communication and comprehension is based upon a mutual experience between users, meaning interpretation is finely tuned, based on a triangulation between speaker, hearer, and world. Interpretation of an idea can diverge because there is no such thing as eternal meaning. Robert Horner uses the example of ‘the right to bear arms’ as an instance where

the original meaning cannot be upheld because the meanings of the words have changed as well as the world in which they are uttered.³⁷

- b) ***Vehicular unpredictability*** (the ‘vehicle’ being the human mind) derives from the potential capacity of the mind to reject, accept, and otherwise transform the symbol if so desired. In short, the mind has the capacity to cause mutations which diverge from what the idea originally signified. Moreover, the more minds through which it passes, the wider its dissemination in printed and digital form, the greater the likelihood of modification according to the greater range of human interests to which it is exposed and subsequently used to satisfy. For it can be postulated that any given idea seems best to thrive by existing in opposition to an idea for which it is an anathema or antithesis; hence there is greater satisfaction to be found in the refuge of an idea which one believes to be right if there exists an idea that embodies an ‘otherness’ which one has been fortunate enough to escape. For example, much of the satisfaction in identifying as a Democrat, in the United States, derives from knowing that one isn’t a Republican, and contrariwise.
- c) ***Replication precarity***, given that ideas must constantly contend with rivals. Consequent to a technologically adept world, a greater capacity to exchange information within and between cultures undermines the ability of ideas, particularly new ones, to replicate without interference. Additionally, it can be observed that when faced with vast amounts of information, the usual response, given the impossibility of reckoning with it all, is to attend to that part of it which confirms the beliefs one already has (confirmation bias), or to otherwise stay within a community which carefully polices the boundaries of accepted discourse. So although technological gadgetry (especially, *inter alia*, through providing access to the internet) makes the transmission of ideas that much more likely, the extent

³⁷ Horner, R. ‘How to Understand Words’, in *Philosophy Now*, Issue 100 (2014), pp. 10-12.

to which they are absorbed – consciously or not – is difficult to gauge. The enormity of the informational load bearing down on the human mind gives rise to defensive strategies involving the deliberate evasion of inconvenient and/or unassimilable ideas.

Given these difficulties, ‘with our strictly limited capacity for attention’, Daniel Dennett notes, ‘the problem faced by others who want us to consider their favourite consideration is essentially a problem of advertising.’³⁸ In regard to advertising space, the Anthropocene symbol has been more fortunate than most. It has emerged not, as in centuries past, in a time of what we could call *low information density* where the stock of available information is restricted, and hence when ideas prospered through lack of competition. It has instead been the beneficiary of various online and printed platforms that have effectively popularised it, particularly among those members of society who tend to read the various periodicals, magazines, and newspapers which have featured it. But being above all a symbol born out of an academic specialisation (that of geology), it has found, unsurprisingly, its main home in academic journals, edited books, and monographs which collectively constitute the means through which academic specialties perpetuate those ideas they find of value for their own, specialised purposes. The development of new ideas serves to satisfy the self-image of academia as an intellectual culture privy to self-aggrandising ‘cutting edge’ expertise, with the capacity to pronounce on the merit of ideas on behalf of wider society. The Anthropocene has therefore been successful insofar as it has proved amenable to the interests which inform the selection of what ideas may appear within these forums.

May we then conclude that it has been an epistemic success (solely in the sense of it being extensively used) because the symbols that socially prevail in this manner (i.e. that

³⁸ Dennett, D. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 510.

are accepted by more people, or by those cliques in society which produce its dominant ideas) automatically are the better ideas for having done so? With some confidence, we can assert the contrary. There is no *sufficient* connection between the number of people who believe in it and the rightness or adequacy of a symbol itself. Is it then the intellectual substance and vocational occupation of the person(s) from whom it derives, and of those who advocate on its behalf, that should persuade us of its legitimacy? Again, not necessarily: while this may in certain cases persuade us where we lack the specialised knowledge to determine its legitimacy for ourselves, in the case of the Anthropocene, with its hypothetical status and its incursion into nonscientific discourse where scientifically equivalent standards of verification do not exist, we may certainly question its form and use on sceptical grounds. Indeed, the fact of its extensive use may obscure the inadequacy or irrelevance of the symbol itself, because ‘the allegedly ‘authoritative’ or ‘influential’ status of an idea is factitious. The degree to which it is authoritative or influential simply indicates how predisposed it is to being socially replicated.’³⁹ This state of affairs naturally invites suspicion of the ideas deemed socially, existentially, authoritative. Hence the present enquiry.

The Archimedean urge for objectivity

On his quest to find out whether he can know anything for certain, and to establish clear and distinct ideas on which knowledge may be grounded, Descartes finds that he is a *res cogitans*. He is at least acquainted, he realises, with the contents of his own consciousness. From this he concludes that he therefore exists: *cogito ergo sum*. By *cogito* he meant not only thinking but also ordinary sense perception. But to confirm the

³⁹ Davies, M. L. ‘Thinking Practice: On the Concept of an Ecology of Knowledge’, in *Breaking the Disciplines: Reconceptions in Knowledge, Art and Culture*, ed. Davies, M. L. & Meskimmon, M. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 11.

existence of a material world beyond himself, beyond his own *cogito*, he needs to locate an idea that would affirm both the existence of that world as well as the capacity of his thinking to know it. He hence proceeds to reason that his possession of the idea of God guarantees that he is not being deceived (by a malicious, dissembling daemon) regarding the existence of a material world. For from the fact that he possesses an idea of God does he infer the real existence of the objects which his senses have been in the habit of perceiving, since he reasons that he could not have acquired that conception of God without a God being in existence to implant it. In the Judeo-Christian theological tradition, moreover, God has attributes (infinity, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence) which preclude the likelihood that he would deceive those whom he created, and who in good faith attempt to carefully consider their beliefs about the world, since deception springs from the existence of defects which a supreme being by definition cannot possess. So, he concludes, 'it is not to be wondered at that God, at my creation, implanted this idea in me, that it might serve, as it were, for the mark of the workman impressed on his work.'⁴⁰

Here Descartes is assured, through his certainty of God's existence, of the consequent existence of the material world and the potential accuracy of his knowledge concerning it, because the existence of God is itself necessary for the existence of anything whatsoever. On this basis, 'I ought no longer to fear that falsity may be met with in what is daily presented to me by the senses... for since God is no deceiver, it therein follows that I am not herein deceived. But because the necessities of action frequently oblige us to come to a determination before we have had leisure for so careful an examination, it must be confessed that the life of man is frequently obnoxious to error...'⁴¹ Earlier in his

⁴⁰ Descartes, R. 'Meditations on the First Philosophy', in *The Rationalists*, trans. Veitch, J. (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 142.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 175.

Meditations, he had expressed a need to establish a fulcrum of this sort to assuage his doubt, to assure himself that notions of ‘body, figure, extension, motion, and place’ were not ‘merely fictions of my mind’, observing that Archimedes, ‘that he might transport the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a point that was firm and immovable.’⁴²

This Archimedean imperative – to leverage certainty on the basis of objective knowledge – informs Descartes’ seminal effort in the history of Western philosophy to achieve the intellectual repose philosophical investigation is meant to bestow: to dispel, by means of the method of doubt, doubt itself. For although the self-refuting nature of sceptical doubt may make certainty elusive, only the deliverances of doubt, the examination of one’s preconceptions, can in principle ever lead to certainty. Doubt in respect to our knowledge keeps the horizons of epistemic and ontological possibility open, since the shape of life depends on the forms of knowledge we value, and therefore the sort of ends we pursue on their basis.

Formerly, of course, it was a matter of common belief that only God could observe the world in its entirety, and discern the real essence of its nature, because He had created it. Necessarily, His God’s-eye point of view comprehended all, because God was a being of infinite substance, without constraints of either a temporal or corporeal kind. He was therefore ideally positioned to know His creation because it seemed natural to presume the designer knows his design, that the maker knows by what means, and for what purposes, the things he makes are made. By contrast, seemingly thwarting human comprehension was the realisation that, mortal as human beings are, they cannot attain a point of access to reality that discloses it in its entirety. Rather, they can only observe discrete phenomena as these appear to the senses, and in the form of mental

⁴² Ibid, p. 118.

representations. What might at first appear to be an objective perspective on the world discloses merely a meagre swatch or sample of its extraordinary plenitude, a plenitude which exceeds the observatory apparatus of any human being by incalculable orders of magnitude. Here the evident limitations of common-sense understanding, its inability to deliver ‘real’ knowledge, persuades us of our fallibility.

What was needed was to eliminate the sources of doubt, to declutter the epistemic landscape of obfuscating impressions. So as the discipline of philosophy developed, its purpose, as Arendt puts it, consisted in the provision of ‘standards and rules, yardsticks and measurements with which the human mind could at least attempt to understand what was happening in the realm of human affairs.’⁴³ An alethic vision of this sort became common to philosophical enquiry following the epistemological turn in the seventeenth century, initiated by Descartes. Having posited a dichotomy of rational mind and inert material, Descartes’ method of doubt was to be employed as a means of winnowing out beliefs that can be doubted in order that there would be revealed a set of principles on which all knowing depends. Doubt would dissuade us from taking our epistemological convictions or habits at face value and require us to identify methods of understanding free of the sort of defects a finite and impressionable being brings to its objects of perception.

For Hobbes, for example, science and philosophy were largely continuous with one another: ‘Philosophy is the knowledge we acquire, by true ratiocination, of appearances, or apparent effects, from the knowledge we have of some possible production or generation of the same; and of such production, as has been or may be, from the knowledge we have of the effects.’⁴⁴ Natural philosophy consisted in the forms of

⁴³ Arendt, H. ‘Socrates’, in Jerome Kohn (ed.) *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 38.

⁴⁴ Hobbes, T. ‘De Corpore’, in J. C. A. Gaskin (ed.) *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 194.

systematic science, and he took science, and thus natural philosophy, to be knowledge of cause and effect: ‘science is the knowledge of consequences, and dependence of one fact upon another: by which, out of that we can presently do, we know how to do something else when we will, or the like, another time.’⁴⁵ The knowledge of consequences depends upon the comprehension of definitions within language, especially of names, which in their exactitude bestow order upon the process of understanding the material world. The ‘systematic’ part of doing philosophy relies upon the ability to predict the outcome of physical experimentation and a capacity to explain their results so as to build up a body of knowledge. With this end in mind, to be delivered of ambiguity in language is to be liberated from the sources, forever lurking therein, of deception and confusion:

The light of humane minds is Perspicuous Words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; *reason* is the pace; Encrease of *Science*, the *way*; and the benefit of man-kind, the *end*. And on the contrary, metaphors, and senseless and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui* [foolish fires]; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt.⁴⁶

Hence the careful and consistent use of language clears the way towards the secure foundation of knowledge, as well as guarding against the unpleasant political effects linguistic misuse and misunderstanding may incur. Language primarily provides a means of analysing experience; that is, ‘in such a way that we can arrive at a complete scientific, mechanistic understanding of the world’ through natural reason, or philosophy.⁴⁷ In the case of Hobbes, then, for whom knowledge and understanding depends on our senses, materialism could present the only possible way of viewing the world since he believed that all objects apprehended by the senses are extant and material. This stands in contrast

⁴⁵ Hobbes, T. *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

⁴⁷ Magee, B. *The Great Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 123.

to his contemporary, Descartes, who took the possibility of understanding as something necessitating an immaterial mind or ego.

More specifically, ‘in the study of philosophy’, Hobbes declares, ‘men search after science.’⁴⁸ This search is a search for knowledge, and knowledge is acquired ‘by true ratiocination’, or natural reason, which inheres in the human ability to compute and consider not only numbers, but ‘magnitude, body, motion, time, degrees of quality, action, conception, proportion, speech and names.’⁴⁹ Such ratiocination as is employed in the practice of philosophy is to be distinguished from, for example, natural and political history; knowledge of which does not count as philosophy since it derives (for Hobbes) from experience and authority rather than ratiocination.⁵⁰ Further, philosophy should, in a thorough and systematic manner, and through careful use of natural reason, be conducted towards the achievement of ends which are of use to human life; and this is to be achieved by means of knowledge acquired by reason that provides, in turn, the ability to produce tangible benefits: ‘By Philosophy, is understood *the Knowledge acquired by Reasoning, from the Manner of the Generation of any thing, to the Properties; or from the Properties, to some possible Way of Generation of the same; to the end be able to produce, as far as matter, and humane force permit, such Effects, as humane life requireth.*’⁵¹

For Hobbes civil philosophy is therefore two-fold in nature, consisting in ethics and politics, while natural philosophy is essential to the prevention of false rules, for ‘ignorance of causes, and of rules, does not set men so farre out of their way, as relying on false rules.’⁵² Moreover, Hobbes states in chapter one of his *De Corpore* that natural

⁴⁸ Hobbes, *De Corpore*, p. 195.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 194 & 188.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 682.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

philosophy pertains to the work of nature, while civil philosophy pertains to commonwealth. Natural philosophy can be interpreted as being the process by which the knowledge of the causes of things come into view, ‘where all questions are concerning the causes of the phantasms of sensible things.’⁵³ While the development of Hobbes’s civil philosophy results in his political theory of the need for an inviolable social contract, it connects to his natural philosophy insofar as his views on the nature of human beings and knowledge of the mechanics of the natural world around them provide the antecedent conditions for his conception of a proper civil society.

In order to undertake such a task, leisure (which Hobbes calls the mother of philosophy in *Leviathan*) is necessary, but of equal importance is that condition most apt for philosophical reflection, namely ‘commonwealth, the mother of *Peace* and *Leisure*.’⁵⁴ The practical benefit of philosophy, its end or purpose, is bound up with answering ‘questions of human knowledge, whose truth is drawn out by natural reason and Syllogisms from human agreements and definitions (i.e. from the meanings of words accepted by common use and consent).’⁵⁵ On the other hand, Hobbes reiterates in his *Decameron Physiologicum* that philosophy also consists in the knowledge of natural causes: declaring further that ‘there is no Knowledge but of Truth.’⁵⁶ Those philosophers who out of curiosity seek to acquire truth, and aim for the benefit of mankind, are to be praised in contrast to those ‘professors’ who care little for truth and the philosophy which is concerned with its knowledge, preferring to use it ‘as a Trade to maintain themselves or gain Preferment; and some for Fashion, and to make themselves fit for ingenious

⁵³ Hobbes, *De Corpore*, p. 200.

⁵⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 683.

⁵⁵ Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 232.

⁵⁶ T. Hobbes, ‘Dialogue One: Of the Original of Natural Philosophy’, in *Decameron physiologicum, or, Ten dialogues of natural philosophy*, p. 1. Early English Books Online.

company... and to Acquiescence in the Authority of those authors whom they have heard commended.’⁵⁷

This whole conception of philosophy ensures it proceeds systematically from elemental axioms, carefully demonstrated. This accordingly set up an epistemic picture, Steven Toulmin notes, ‘of Man the Rational Knower facing Nature the Unchanging Object of Knowledge’, whereupon the task for the human mind is to acquire mastery over law-bound, immutable nature through the application of ‘Fixed Principles’ which could be revealed on the basis of reason.⁵⁸ Hence the rational establishment of linguistically precise standards and rules were increasingly believed crucial to the extent that without them philosophy, at least when compared to the enumerative sciences, appears to blunder blindly about, unable to tell whether its conceptual accounts constitute actual knowledge. In pursuit of this Archimedean ideal, and deflating the ancient Greek and Roman preoccupation with what makes for a life well lived, philosophy’s image became that ‘of a discipline that stood above individual lives... This move allowed philosophy to be conceptualized as a discipline not tied to this or that person, but instead as engaging, progressively, in the search for permanent answers to questions of universal import that were and would be valid for all human beings.’⁵⁹

The advancement of this scientific vision of philosophy, which later instigated the transmogrification of natural philosophy into the tripartite empirical or physical sciences, could therefore be taken to depend, as in Hobbes, upon the employment of individual ratiocination, or natural reason, in the establishment of propositional knowledge. Knowing would inhere in the assent given to propositions, and it is on the collective

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Toulmin, S. *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 23 & 21.

⁵⁹ Celenza, C. S. ‘What Counted as Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance? The History of Philosophy, the History of Science, and Styles of Life’, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2013), pp. 400-1.

agreement concerning the validity of propositions that truth depends, since truth is solely a property of propositions insofar as ‘the thing which is believed, is always a proposition, (i.e. an affirmative or negative assertion) which we allow to be true.’⁶⁰ For example, the identity theory of truth holds that only considering the truth-bearer (a word or proposition) and truth-maker (a fact or state of affairs) as identical can consist in truth – held plausible by idealism.⁶¹

Correspondence as an epistemic ideal

This influential picture of knowledge was largely an inheritance from Greek philosophy. Since Plato it was supposed that words like ‘beauty’ and ‘justice’ stand for immutable essences that have an existence independent of how such words are used. Language was hence considered representative of reality: the users of language represent both themselves and what is ‘out there’ to themselves by arranging the extant symbols that collectively constitute what a language is. A linguistic representation in the form of a sentence or proposition is intended to provide an account based upon the conjunction of the signs on which all representations depend. Of these elemental or primary signs themselves, Plato notes that ‘it is impossible to give a rational account of any of these primaries; it is only possible to name it, since a name is all it has... just as the elements are woven together, so their names may be woven together to produce a spoken account, because an account is essentially a weaving together of names.’⁶² Such accounts are predicated upon the notion of an intrinsic relation of correspondence between a sign and its nominal referent: the semantic relationship to which Plato refers.

⁶⁰ Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 236.

⁶¹ See Bradley, F. H. ‘On Truth and Copying’, *Truth*, ed. Blackburn, S. & Simmons, K. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 31-45.

⁶² Plato, *Theaetetus* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 116.

Until the method of linguistic philosophy succeeded the orthodoxy of logical positivism, which measured the meaningfulness of other discourses against the standards of science, one was likely to adhere to the common understanding of a word as acting as a sign of mutual correspondence to a referent within the physical world. The early Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning in the *Tractatus* is notable in this regard. Just as being able to apprehend the Forms in Plato's metaphysics would constitute true knowledge (*noēsis*) as opposed to an amalgamation of mere opinions (*doxas*), a name given to an object was presumed to possess a necessary connection to it. That is to say, a belief in the adequacy of language went largely unquestioned as that which was able to 'mirror' component parts of reality. The standard-bearer of what Rorty calls the 'linguistic turn', in his later work Wittgenstein promulgated the scrutiny of linguistic properties, propounding the idea that to know what a word means is to know how to use it, and that the sum total of a word's actual *uses* would thereby constitute its meaning. Yet the early Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning thought of 'objects' in the same way that Plato thought of 'primaries'; whereby 'a picture is a model of reality.'⁶³ The Socratic dialectical method originally sought to access the Forms through *nous*, to escape the world of imitation and enter the realm of epistemological initiation. In the Platonic sense, truth is an absolute manifest in the essence of the Forms themselves and requires no physical embodiment. That which all truth has in common is the Form of Truth. This metaphysical view of truth as non-physical 'essence' is retained following the transposition of truth into monotheism, whereupon a transcendent deity becomes the single bearer and guarantor of truth immutable. Correspondence is here necessary in a

⁶³ Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 8-9. He goes on to state, in 6. 13, that 'Logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world. Logic is transcendental', p. 78.

more urgent sense, for one must recognise the incarnate source in whom Truth is total essence in order to obtain one's spiritual salvation from the flames of hell.

Therefore it is commonly held (in epistemological realism) that the linguistic representation necessarily *does* capture the essential features of the world as it 'really' exists. Effectively, however, the idea that one can be 'objectively' representing the world through corresponding to it simply juxtaposes the benefits of a transcendent, Archimedean perspective onto our faculties of sense. But backed by historical precedent, the notion of correspondence, or the adequation of word and object, underlies the dominant thinking concerning the fidelity of representations to those things they are said to demonstrably show us, as they really exist 'in themselves.' Hence the positivistic belief in language as a pure medium; in its capacity to remain faithful to the ontological inner presence of the things to which it is applied; extracting the *quidditas* of their being through precise linguistic expression. That the representation can only ever be an approximation and not the reality it purports to portray is ignored in favour of eliding the idea of representation with that of verisimilitude, with mimesis or mirroring. Upon this premise of representational correspondence language is believed to possess is added the power of truth; used to apply to certain concepts the status of real knowledge; i.e. justified *true* belief.

In Heidegger's etymological study of truth, *alētheia* is considered to be unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*). He criticises the Platonic metaphysical view as setting a precedent for truth to be 'correspondence, grounded in correctness, between proposition and thing.'⁶⁴ And yet, correspondence is 'utterly obscure' despite being apparently self-evident.⁶⁵ In the Platonic sense, however, and like later imitations of this

⁶⁴ Heidegger, M. *The Essence of Truth* (London: Continuum Books, 2002), p. 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

precedent, Truth is a logically closed concept. To be closer to the essence (*wesen*) of Truth means being more correct, more *equivalent*, since according to the identity principle ($A = A$) ‘only truth itself is completely true.’⁶⁶ Heidegger holds that the original Greek meaning of *alētheia* as unconcealment has been subverted by the correspondence model. His view hence treats of truth as though it were directly comprehensible through its numinous quality, regarding it as an essence to be unmasked; which implies that one would need to have formed a prior notion of the form such a truth would take in order to identify when one had successfully ‘unconcealed’ it. Equally baffling is that Heidegger seems to have thought that reverting back to a formerly ‘primordial’ conception of truth would provide something meaningful to say about its present condition, a means of contemporary guidance: ‘let us for a moment accede to the wish for historical orientation.’⁶⁷ Apparently, ‘it is *historical* return which brings us into what is actually happening today’; and ‘what does the attempt at distancing ourselves from the present through historical reflection lead to? To this: that what is current today is confirmed as itself ancient!’⁶⁸ It may be remarked that the effort to ‘distance’ oneself from the present is as illusory as the thought that one can ‘return’ to something historical – by definition something altogether absent, and therefore past insofar as it belonged to a time beyond our present ability to reach. Ultimately, the correspondence model can be undermined only if one moves away from the metaphysical; away from the thought of separate essences which require revealing; and away from the idea that truth requires resurrecting from history.

Following Popper, we may allow that we can never utterly prove our theories about the world, but we do say things which are true or false according to established linguistic

⁶⁶ Davidson, D. ‘Truth Rehabilitated’, in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Heidegger, *Essence*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 6.

conventions that are required for allocating to descriptions a particular amount of sense in language. This nowhere implies correspondence, only principles by which language is able to cope with the world; the principles themselves derive from a need to make certain descriptions conform to a broadly recognised and translatable standard. The idea of truth as correspondence, on the other hand, depends on a two-fold assumption: that there exists both a 'real' world, and a world of 'appearance' (of language) which must invariably be seen 'through'. To subvert this dichotomy one must make the idea of a 'real' world a myth. As Nietzsche declares: 'we have suppressed the true world: what world survives? The apparent world perhaps? Certainly not! *In abolishing the true world we have also abolished the world of appearance!*'⁶⁹ Remove this article of faith and truth deflates accordingly. Truth will hereby invert in on itself, since it has no other means of comparison outside its linguistic framework against which it could measure itself as a standard. It 'represents' only itself. Hence we do not recognise, Donald Davidson observes, 'what it would be like to compare sentences with what they are about', since there 'are no entities with which to compare sentences.'⁷⁰ With this rejection of the old scheme-content distinction, we hitherto find nothing to which we might 'correspond' since the terms reality and appearance actually denote the same world.

Davidson's point is an essential one to recognise if we are to break the stranglehold of correspondence in its presumed function: the sense of truth as being language corresponding to a separate, intrinsically inviolable reality. It contradicts the idea of a 'concrete objectification of human experience.'⁷¹ So in the expression of all kinds of statements, we do not require the sentence to correspond to anything non-sentential, e.g.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, F. *Twilight of the Idols* (Wordsworth Classics, 2007), p. 23.

⁷⁰ Davidson, D. 'Introduction', in *Enquires into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. xx.

⁷¹ Steiner, G. 'The Language Animal', in *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 82.

‘there’s a full moon’ is true if and only if the moon is full: if it satisfies the requisite truth conditions. I hereby see if it does so by checking if it matches up to the designated referent for which it stands. In this way, I understand what another person has said because we share a common semantical framework. Davidson states: ‘Tarskian semantics introduces no entities to correspond to sentences, and it is only by introducing such entities that one can make serious sense of language mirroring or corresponding to or representing features of the world.’⁷² Certainly we nominate things in the world to bear particular names and learn these accordingly, but to no extent does this require the idea that we are ‘representing’ or ‘misrepresenting’ an ‘external’ world; nor does it imply that we are in any *objective* sense wrong when we invoke and map our language onto it. Indeed to remark, as does Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, that ‘to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and what is not that it is not, is true’, is unproblematic when confined to the idea that the concept of truth merely enables one to distinguish or test the propositional content a sentence contains against a prior knowledge of the most likely field of connotation to which it applies.⁷³ It enables us to know when confronted with such a sentence the conditions that sentence would have to meet in order for it to be the case, and conversely those under which this obligation would not pertain.

So Davidson does not mean that we do not talk referentially about the world when we use language to express our thoughts concerning various parts of it. Rather, Davidson’s conception of truth rejects the disjunction between ‘organizing system and something waiting to be organized’, since the belief in representations this engenders will provoke the assumption that in order to make the world intelligible we will (as situated

⁷² Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 322.

⁷³ Aristotle, ‘Metaphysics’, 1101b, p. 749.

from different viewpoints) invoke different representative schemes in order to comprehend what is essentially the same reality.⁷⁴ He instead believes that we must proceed, charitably, on the basis of a largely correct, shared view of the world because it cannot be shown (by an omniscient interpreter) that we are in any *profound* sense wrong about it: ‘if we reject the idea of an uninterpreted source of evidence no room is left for a dualism of scheme and content... language is not a screen or filter through which our knowledge must pass.’⁷⁵ In order that we might be shown to be wrong would require an ‘untranslatable, conceptual scheme.’⁷⁶ That is, a view of the world that cannot itself be reduced to the terms of an already existent ‘scheme’, and unbound from any view of the world as it is currently observed, but nevertheless able to test the correctness of variant schemes against a total knowledge of the ‘content’ of the world it would naturally need to possess. Being devoid of any reason to believe this objective view to be possible, or even desirable, we are able to see truth as a collective, translatable tool that enhances comprehension of differing views of the world. Thus the concept of truth, in providing a shared basis for the dissemination of contrasting views, is essential in ‘understanding, describing, and explaining the thought and talk of rational creatures’, and is central to grasping the notion of belief: ‘we do not grasp the concept of belief if we do not know that a belief may be true or false, nor do we know what it is that someone believes if we do not know under what conditions it would be true.’⁷⁷

Putnam’s sceptical hypothesis and the transcendental reasoning response

A further elucidation of two notable efforts to dispel the kind of *deep* scepticism about our concepts epistemology in its inherited form induces may help further clarify my own

⁷⁴ Davidson, ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, *Enquires*, p. 189.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. xx.

⁷⁶ Rorty, R. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 309.

⁷⁷ Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 322.

position. To take a classic example: according to Hilary Putnam's sceptical hypothesis I could be a disembodied brain in a vat. An envatted brain is a brain stimulated by a supercomputer, which generates what seem to be everyday experiences, and is unfortunately commandeered by an evil scientist. Moreover, suggests Putnam, suppose this to be the persistent and permanent state of affairs in the universe for all brains since the beginning of time, and every brain-person is in fact floating, disembodied, in a vat.⁷⁸ Essential to the dilemma is that my experience of, for instance, eating a sandwich is identical to a situation where I am a brain in a vat thinking I am eating a sandwich. Because I cannot tell the difference between the two experiences, I cannot be sure I am not envatted. So:

- 1) If I know p (I am eating a sandwich), then I know I am not a brain in a vat.
- 2) I do not know I am not a brain in a vat.
- 3) Therefore, I do not know p .

Putnam's response is to question whether under vat conditions we would be able to say or think such a predicament possible, and reasons in a transcendent fashion to demonstrate the self-refuting nature of the hypothesis. This can be set forth as follows:

- 1) I am able to enquire as to whether all people, including myself, have always been brains in vats.
- 2) If I were not already acquainted with things like brains and vats then I would be unable to refer to them.
- 3) Therefore, it cannot be the case that all persons since the beginning of time have been brains in a vat.

Putnam's anti-sceptical strategy repudiates what he calls a 'magical theory of reference' which assumes that to possess the name of an object is to have an intrinsic connection to

⁷⁸ Putnam, H. *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 6-7.

it: such that when I remark ‘there goes a vat’, it is necessarily the case that I am referring to vats. However, this would be to disregard the ‘contextual, contingent, conventional connection’ words have to the bearer.⁷⁹ He instead favours semantic-externalism: the view that the meanings of words and sentences depend on conditions external to the user. This equally applies to mental images, such as thinking that I am a brain in a vat. Were I really in that predicament, then in the language ‘Vatlish’ I could not refer to nor represent the truth about my situation. Because the causal environment in which I am embedded has the constraints it has, I could not form a mental image which actually refers to brains or vats. Therefore, as Nagel puts it, ‘the conditions of reference permit us to think that we are brains in a vat, only if this is not true.’⁸⁰

Having set forth Putnam’s method of combatting scepticism, we can now set out and contrast the stratagem employed by Rorty. But two implications regarding the radical/Cartesian sceptical condition should first be noted. This is (1) a (radical because rare) condition preoccupied with a perceived opacity regarding our relation to the world. It is to be contrasted with the everyday sort of scepticism which withholds assent to certain beliefs in order to assess their validity. Because radical scepticism does not occur to most people, this implies that the problem can only exist and be expressed under intellectual conditions unique to a philosophical sub-discipline called epistemology and the objective foundations for knowledge it demands. If this is true, (2) it is conceivable that radical sceptics are being held prisoner to an optional way of thinking about knowledge which we have inherited from Descartes. This way of thinking supposes that uncertainty about the accuracy of our representations allows scepticism to flourish. The knowledge we think we derive from those representations of the world are distortions of

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸⁰ Nagel, T. *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 72.

the world as it actually is. So apparently, radical scepticism is a genuine problem so long as we hold to a representationalist picture of thought and language. It is the rejection of this picture, according to Rorty, which entails the dissolution of the problem.

Rorty's repudiation of Cartesian scepticism

'The Cartesian mind simultaneously made possible veil-of-ideas skepticism and a discipline devoted to circumventing such skepticism.'⁸¹ Here, I think, is a key pronouncement regarding the source of Cartesian scepticism. It can be more formally expressed by the following:

- 1) Epistemology desires something called foundational knowledge. It searches for 'context-free' justification for beliefs. It tries to link the 'transitory human subject with what is there *anyway*', the 'Objective World'.⁸² It hopes for a transparent representation of 'The Way the World Is'.
- 2) The intellectual conditions this desire creates (appearance/reality, subject/object dualisms; the existence of a 'fact of the matter'; the 'veil of appearances' etc.) induce anxiety about how to satisfy the demand for objectivity: how to mirror reality.
- 3) Radical scepticism develops as a symptom of these epistemological conditions.
- 4) By positing the existence of foundational knowledge, radical scepticism is allowed to take root.
- 5) Therefore, epistemology is the source of radical scepticism.

So doing away with epistemology, Rorty thinks, will mean the demise of scepticism. He would, I think, express this in the following manner:

- 1) The articulation of radical scepticism can only occur if one holds that thought and language stand between mind and world (a product of epistemology) and must represent that world accurately to the mind.

⁸¹ Rorty, R. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 140.

⁸² Rorty, R. *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 35.

- 2) Because it is part of the optional vocabulary of epistemology, this representationalist view is optional.
- 3) If epistemology in its representationalist mode is rejected, radical scepticism cannot be invoked, because there is no *tertium quid* (third thing) which implants the doubt to begin with.
- 4) Therefore, under *alternative intellectual conditions*, radical scepticism need no longer be considered a problem.

I think we can see that this view depends on several key premises: (a) the optionality premise, (b) the sufficiency premise, and (c) the contact with the world premise. If I understand Rorty correctly, these could take the following form:

- A) The optionality premise is that vocabularies are as contingent as the persons who use them. In the absence of any final vocabulary, it remains for us to choose which vocabulary best suits our purposes. Rorty thus takes a historicist view of the vocabulary of epistemology (e.g. representation, truth, correspondence), seeing it as ‘a product of the seventeenth century’ and unbinding on the present.⁸³
- B) The sufficiency premise holds that it is sufficient to have beliefs be justified only in relation to other beliefs, without worrying whether they represent something called reality. Beliefs stand in a causal rather than representational relation to the world.
- C) The contact with the world premise is predicated on the conditions the anti-representationalist advocates. Because there is no distinction between reality and appearance, we must consider ourselves in contact with the world at all times: ‘The anti-representationalist... insists on this point – the point that our minds or our language could not (as the representationalist skeptic fears) be ‘out of touch with reality’ any more than

⁸³ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 136.

our bodies could.’⁸⁴ Rorty here seems to echo Nietzsche’s remark from *Twilight of the Idols* that doing away with reality or a ‘real world’ is to do away with appearances also.

Rorty then, in contrast to Putnam, does not try to answer the sceptic directly. He first prefers to say, with Michael Williams, that the radical sceptic *cannot* be answered directly, and, more importantly, doesn’t need to be.⁸⁵ He doesn’t need to be answered because the position the sceptic holds is not central to the human condition, and can be dispensed with. That sceptical position, Rorty agrees, is one which depends upon a foundational conception of knowledge: the view that there are beliefs about the world which are foundational, which are required in order to have justified true beliefs. Within *that* intellectual framework then, indeed, we have every reason to think we might not have objective knowledge of anything, for sceptical hypotheses can always be advanced in the absence of foundations that would secure such knowledge. One will always seem to fall short by comparison. So radical scepticism is not incoherent in the context of such a demanding epistemology, but is quite unnecessary outside of it.

Stepping outside that context means dismissing the objectivity requirement: the requirement that the knowledge we have be of an objective world, independent of how it appears to us.⁸⁶ So, advocates Rorty, if one takes the position that beliefs are justified only by other beliefs, a contextualist position, then you will find no reason to worry whether your beliefs are accurately representing an objective world or are ‘merely’ subjective ‘beliefs about the world’.⁸⁷ We can see, further, that by agreeing with Davidson that ‘having beliefs about things cannot swing free from the way things are,

⁸⁴ Rorty, R. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 5.

⁸⁵ Rorty, R. ‘Anti-Skeptical Weapons: Michael Williams versus Donald Davidson’, in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 153.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

because such beliefs are part of a web of causal interactions with those things', Rorty concurs with Putnam's view that a brain in a vat, which produces only an illusion of reference to objects, couldn't wonder whether it was really a brain in a vat.⁸⁸ It lacks the causal relation to those things which holding such a belief would require. It seems then that Rorty agrees with Putnam's semantic externalism to the extent that to have a belief at all requires that there be a world, other people, and a language. Importantly, he especially wants to support Davidson in 'trying to undermine the skeptic's idea that we can know what our beliefs are without already having a lot of true beliefs about the causal relations between those beliefs and the world.'⁸⁹ We should set this Davidsonian conception out more precisely as follows:

1. Beliefs are caused by the objects of beliefs; they are not representations or pictures.
2. Most of our beliefs are true because they are so caused. Most beliefs further cohere with other bodies of belief.
3. If most of our beliefs are true, then radical/Cartesian scepticism is not an intellectually tenable position.⁹⁰

Ultimately, 'if... my doubts are as unspecific and abstract as Descartes's – are such that I can do nothing to resolve them – they should be dismissed, with Peirce, as 'make-believe.' Philosophy should ignore them.'⁹¹ Even Thomas Nagel, although he wants to hold onto objectivity regardless, concedes that 'scepticism... is a problem only because of the realist claims of objectivity.'⁹² Moreover, the formulation of sceptical doubt is a purely intellectual exercise (as it was for Descartes) divorced from everyday affairs. It discloses a preference for examining the intellectual conditions of life rather than

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 160-61.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 158-59.

⁹⁰ Davidson, D. 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, E. Lepore, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 319.

⁹¹ Rorty, R. 'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?' in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 19.

⁹² Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 71.

remaining solely within, and subject to, the confines those conditions impose. The point is that the desire for absolute legitimation for our beliefs can only be instilled once we acquire the specifically intellectual vocabulary of epistemology. But Rorty's preference is to substitute hope for knowledge: he is forward looking, future oriented. He wishes to exchange existing vocabularies for new ones which work better rather than continue trying to apply those we have inherited. It is his focus on contingency which makes him think that radical scepticism will one day be counted as a non-problem, if only philosophers would stop indulging in a worn-out vocabulary.

Fundamentally, radical doubts have no substance. They are, at bottom, optional. Putnam's message was that radical scepticism was self-refuting. Rorty's message is that by exchanging the vocabulary of epistemology and objectivity (in which radical scepticism makes sense) for that of anti-representationalism and contextualism (in which it doesn't), radical scepticism can be disposed of. But even if we advance the proposition that the Anthropocene doesn't need to be thought of as an objective representation, there may be other grounds on which it may be considered false, as I indicated earlier in my introduction. For although the sort of scepticism that fears being entirely out of touch with reality can be considered baseless, scepticism in regard to our concepts is certainly justified and, in existential terms, essential. If I think, for example, that the Anthropocene concept is intrinsically corresponding to or representing the world, then I have no reason to question its propriety. Enquiry is shut down from the start. But if I think that it is an optional, potentially inaccurate symbolic projection of dubious provenance, then I may examine what sense it has based on principles and criteria apart from identity, correspondence, representation, and objectivity.

So far as our knowledge goes, this view ought in theory to quell the worries of the *radical* sceptic, who fears that they are out of touch with reality based on an ill-advised

dichotomy between mind and matter that requires breaching. This dichotomy requires an extraordinarily demanding ‘quest for certainty’; a quest that instigates a heavy intellectual burden for posterity, and of which Hobbes was an inheritor. It can be shown, however, that such an idiom is not intrinsic to epistemology but is instead an optional part of its vocabulary inherited from the seventeenth century. Deriving, Toulmin argues, from ‘the political, social, and theological chaos embedded in the Thirty Years’ War’, which because it had made scepticism more attractive prompted the rationalist attempt to provide the sort of geometrical certainty that would alleviate it.⁹³

Still, since the seventeenth century much of modern philosophy and science has been engaged in this epistemological vocabulary of objectivity and correspondence. They attempt to comprehend and therefore bring life under control through the production of knowledge as the representation of the material world by the immaterial mind. This has been their constructive, systematic goal. Fundamentally, Laplantine asserts:

What is characteristic of the form of knowledge elaborated on the basis of classic European rationality is therefore not – or not only – the full exercise of categorizing and classificatory thinking. It is the deculturalization of meaning, first named then distributed, and by a process of packaging, numbered, polled, controlled, regulated, normalized. The dogmatism of dating, of remorseless clean breaks, of neat and incorruptible borders, does not merely divide. By assigning and apprehending, it captures, reifies, subjects, appropriates, manipulates.⁹⁴

This is part of the Cartesian inheritance. For Weber too, science, as well as the ‘intellectualist rationalisation’ through which it becomes possible to ‘master all things by calculation’, bestows disenchantment upon the world with its ‘unreal realm of artificial

⁹³ Toulmin, S. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 70.

⁹⁴ Laplantine, *The Life of the Senses*, p. 37.

abstractions.’⁹⁵ Nothing is any longer mysterious because in principle nothing is unknowable: that is, unclassifiable, unquantifiable, unidentifiable.

Philosophy with a human face

Yet rather than providing a closed, irrevocable set of propositions that correspond to an unchanging reality, philosophy can instead be promoted as an activity devoted to the ‘forming, inventing, and fabricating’ of concepts that would, if adopted, come to question our actually existing conditions.⁹⁶ In this case, philosophy may, sensing the futility of such an injunction, reject attempts to fossilise a particular version of reality for the sake of posterity. It instead becomes ‘the movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules.’⁹⁷ Here there is a distinctly ephemeral, disjunctive, and subversive tone to philosophical enquiry. Insisting on scepticism, its task is to initiate a break away from the truths and forms of knowledge anchored by convention to demonstrate, in Foucault’s case, their ineliminable contingency.

Here the central purpose of philosophy ought to be to assist men and women in their understanding of themselves, what they are doing, and what their situation is. It should therefore critically enquire into the linguistic means by which, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, they ‘describe and explain the universe to themselves’, where this consists in the scrutiny of ‘categories, concepts, models, ways of thinking or acting’; and ‘in the bringing to light of these models, social, moral, political... with a view to examining whether they are

⁹⁵ Weber, M. ‘Science as a Vocation’, in Tauber, A. I. (ed.) *Science and the Quest for Reality* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 383-5.

⁹⁶ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 2.

⁹⁷ Foucault, M. ‘The Masked Philosopher’, in Rabinow, P. (ed.) *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 327.

adequate to their task.’⁹⁸ It would aim to bring such elements under duress. This view rejects the sort of philosophical enquiry that Jameson summarises as perpetually ‘haunted by the dream of some fool-proof self-sufficient system, a set of interlocking concepts that are their own cause.’⁹⁹ The intellectual perturbation generated as the result of such an enquiry is in itself reason enough to undertake it since the forms of language and discourse we take to be valid ‘dictate our unconscious presuppositions of thought.’¹⁰⁰ It is an activity that leaves us better able to distinguish between the vast number of both ‘defective insights’ and useful conceptions which are ‘rooted in language and literature’, and thereby deliver ourselves of the former wherever possible.¹⁰¹

In this type of approach, Martin L. Davies points out, ‘philosophical reflection is always material, always attentive to its life-world, hence always demonstrative of an intellectual ecology. Reflection aims to get at what is really happening, to reveal the underlying processes at work in the world. It aims to uncover what is behind them.’¹⁰² This is part of a subversive strain of philosophy that repudiates the possibility of a final synthesis of, or unimpeachable means of reckoning with, reality. It tampers with what we are told to think, scrutinises our imbrication within certain beliefs, and enquires as to ‘what ideas, concepts, or points of view in fact have the strongest claim to intellectual authority over our thoughts and actions.’¹⁰³ This means facing a situation, as Toulmin points out, which:

Is no longer an Aristotelian one, in which Man’s epistemic task is to recognise the fixed Essences of Nature; nor is it a Hegelian one, in which Human Mind alone develops historically against a static background of Nature. Rather, it is a problem that requires us

⁹⁸ Berlin, I. ‘The Purpose of Philosophy’, in Henry Hardy (ed.) *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 10-11.

⁹⁹ Jameson, F. ‘First Impressions’, in *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 28, No. 7, 7th September 2006. Accessed 4th November 2016. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n17/fredric-jameson/first-impressions>

¹⁰⁰ Whitehead, A. N. *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 66.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Davies, *Thinking Practice*, p. 24.

¹⁰³ Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, p. 3.

to come to terms with the developing relationship between Human Ideas and a Natural World, neither of which is invariant.¹⁰⁴

What this situation now demands, I submit, is the need to divest ourselves of the old and burdensome quest (the Archimedean hangover) for a God's-eye view of the world; a quest that retains in its cunningly disguised egoism, in its intellectual vanity, a conception of life now defunct. As Toulmin implies, the variance of life, its anthropogenic destabilisation, is at odds with fixed and immutable answers, immovable states of affairs, or fossilised facts of the matter. The egoism which I mention sees the world as something one can get a handle on from a position in time and space that isn't bound to the provisionality of that position. But paradoxically, in sourcing the means of attaining objectivity in our cognitive apparatus, and hence in making that objectivity reliant upon a mind in the first place, it makes the human mind the all-seeing centre of the universe even as it pretends to have escaped the bounds of cognitive insight to which the mind is necessarily confined.

Indeed, what Putnam calls the 'craving for objectivity' leads to the 'adolescent' idea 'that everything we say is false because everything we say falls short of being everything that could be said.' Yet since there is no 'unconceptualized reality', we evidently cannot compare our beliefs with 'things as they are in themselves.'¹⁰⁵ In therefore disqualifying us from the mystical Archimedean view that grants us access to Things As They Really Are (and always will be), we are left to simply compare beliefs from within different, and sometimes incommensurable, conceptual frameworks. But this doesn't mean that our beliefs won't still depend on the way the world is: as explained earlier, world-building and the concepts on which it relies is interdependently tied to the world; unavoidably

¹⁰⁴ Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Putnam, H. *Realism with a Human Face*, edited by Conant, J. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 120-22.

dependent upon it. Epistemic externalism, for example, doesn't accept that belief is merely a matter of what internal factors are at play in the mind of the believer. Similarly, as mentioned, semantic externalism doesn't accept that the meanings of words reside solely in the mind, but are rather dependent on the state of the world at large.

But letting go of this weighty, Archimedean aspiration is difficult. Built into the culture of analytic philosophy as practiced and reproduced in the larger, well-established philosophy departments of the West is the aim of maximal detachment, which is seen as a necessary prerequisite to attain objectivity – as though objectivity were itself an unquestionable virtue in human life. Unless we somehow stand outside the relationship between ourselves and the world which objectivity requires, the thinking goes, we cannot claim for our beliefs the status of real knowledge – precisely because of the metaphysical inheritance discussed earlier. But the problem here, of course, is there is no way to describe the world independently of ourselves except by employing exactly the kind of concepts which, by definition, are from the start only ever produced from *within* that very relationship between ourselves and the world our descriptions are trying to transcend. Indeed, the position that philosophy is about attaining disinterested apprehension of the facts of the matter takes reality to be something that doesn't require mediation – but reality has always been mediated, necessarily, because no source of evidence is ever uninterpreted, and interpretation only takes place from within that aforementioned relationship between mind and world, not outside of it. In any case, our finitude cancels the possibility of total comprehension from within the language we now employ, from within our situation as we presently conceive it. As Whitehead rightly says, 'there is always an understanding beyond our area of comprehension. The reason is that the notion of intelligence in pure abstraction from things understood is a myth. Thus a complete

understanding is a perfect grasp of the universe in its totality. We are finite beings; and such a grasp is denied to us.¹⁰⁶

Still, some fear that in the absence of strict criteria for knowledge and action we might fall for the nihilism of anything goes; that if the beliefs we hold are revealed to be contingently held (e.g.) by the type of genealogical enquiry famously exemplified in Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality in *The Genealogy of Morals* (i.e. shown to be dependent upon, and arising out of, cultural, historical factors specific to the past), and therefore not necessarily universalisable across time and space, this renders our beliefs less valid. In *The View from Nowhere*, for instance, Thomas Nagel observes that the temptation to transcend the longstanding realist dilemma 'of how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his worldview included', either through denying the problem exists, or that even if it exists it isn't a pressing problem, attempts to 'turn philosophy into something less difficult and more shallow than it is.'¹⁰⁷ In this I sympathise with Nagel – the attempt to purge philosophy of problems by deflating them or appealing to the historical contingency of the problems themselves *does* diminish the Archimedean enterprise, and can give the mistaken impression that problems are things to be eliminated, not solved.

But it's possible to diminish an intellectual enterprise in one respect while building it up in another. It is no use trying to solve problems that cannot be solved with the intellectual tools presently available to us, particularly if the tools themselves produce knowledge of indeterminate value (as they surely must in a situation of shifting points of ontological reference). In a time of pressing socio-political problems, such self-

¹⁰⁶ Whitehead, *Modes*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁷ Nagel, T. *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 3, 12.

indulgence absorbs valuable time and energy. We simply do not, nor can we, possess an Archimedean view, and wishing we did so will not alter the fact. Furthermore, we will have to give up thinking that if we somehow achieved it, our epistemological problems would necessarily dissolve in the face of an absolute point of reference against which we could finally compare our political, social, and ethical beliefs. In a time of accelerating developments in human affairs, when human action intrudes upon all life to the detriment of life itself, nothing could undermine intellectual integrity further than the demand it conform to an unchanging, absolute view neither rooted in, nor subject to, the world over which it supposedly stands.

Rather, the false modesty behind the ‘craving for absolutes’, as Putnam puts it, risks transfiguring the world in terms of ‘monism’: and ‘monism is a bad outlook in every area of human life.’¹⁰⁸ Most often, for instance, monism is adept at securing power for the few over the many by claiming for a single, antecedent perspective or source an inalienable right to govern and judge all else in its name, since everything that exists stems from, and owes its continued existence to, a single principle. Capitalism, I would suggest, could for many today function as this single principle of unyielding validity. I would claim, too, that Putnam’s pluralistic outlook, the antidote to monism, would naturally reject the idea that the establishment of a single principle could be a necessary or sufficient condition for the fruitful coordination and continuation of human life, because human life is constantly subject to alterations which that principle, being ossified, could neither predict nor pre-empt, and which in any case could turn out – as has happened in the case of unfettered capitalism – to be a liability to human survival.

This truth, I think, best comes out in Arendt’s affirmation of our ability to start new and unexpected processes in the world through our inherent capacity for action:

¹⁰⁸ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 131.

Action... no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries. Limitations and boundaries exist within the realm of human affairs, but they never offer a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself.¹⁰⁹

Action depends upon what she calls ‘natality’ as a creative condition. From birth we constitute a unique departure from previous human beings in virtue of our being unlike anyone who has ever existed. However, action, Arendt reminds us, ‘is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.’¹¹⁰ Our authenticity derives from the capacity to act in relation to others; that is, we are authentic precisely because we are *not* alone. Nietzsche’s *Freigeist* (free spirit), by contrast, manifests a permanent homelessness in the world because he mistakes solitude for autonomy. Therefore, he ‘cannot feel on earth otherwise than as a wanderer... there must be something wandering within him [...] bright things are thrown down to him, the gifts of all those free spirits who are at home in mountain, wood, and solitude...’¹¹¹ This kind of independence cannot help but result in disappointment since it forgets that the authenticity it desires can only be granted through a full relationship with a plural world. The authenticity of an agent consists in the establishment of relationships with others.

Moreover, judgement is an expression of autonomy rooted in both interdependence and independence. Judgement relates to the capacity to reflect on our experiential conditions. Although action and reflection cannot give ‘form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream’, to recall a line from Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a person is never a completely passive actor of a part that has been written for him or her. Our ability to judge autonomously, that is, our ‘capacity to take up

¹⁰⁹ Arendt, H. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 190-91.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, F. *Human, All Too Human*, trans. M. Faber & S. Lehmann (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 266.

reflective distance on one's beliefs, activities, norm-governed actions, and existential life projects', although often challenged by adaptive preferences and coercive contexts, is a real and enduring capacity nevertheless.¹¹² The ability to act via natality, along with our capacity for judgement, provide us with the tools to rethink our lives even if very few of us have the power or resources to make them anew. We can attribute different meanings to our lives and supersede the meanings we are given. In this Kantian sense, autonomy necessitates, as well as action, 'an ability to be independent in one's own judgements.'¹¹³ This kind of independence is necessarily engaged in the social situations which colour the choices all agents face.

Further, in the Heideggerian sense (in his *Sein und Zeit*), authenticity was always close to the liberal conception of autonomy. To be authentic, one would create oneself in and through one's decisions. Heidegger differs, however, in that he reversed the Cartesian starting point: he started with a self that conforms to the social world instead of an isolated, autonomous self not subject to it. This conforming self, wrapped up in social norms, must *become* autonomous; developing ourselves as who we wish ourselves to be (a theme later popularised by French existentialists in the 1940s and 50s). As Jaspers puts it:

Man is always something more than he knows of himself. He is not what he is simply once for all, but is a process; he is not merely an extant life, but is, within that life, endowed with possibilities through the freedom he possesses to make of himself what he will by the activities on which he decides.¹¹⁴

Although, as Geertz rightly points out, 'our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are... cultural products', to maintain our standing as beings who are always and

¹¹² Allen, A. *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 98.

¹¹³ Markus, M. 'The 'Anti-feminism' of Hannah Arendt', in G. T. Kaplan & C. S. Kessler (eds.) *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 122.

¹¹⁴ Jaspers, K. *Man in the Modern Age* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), p. 169.

necessarily in a process of becoming and not cocooned in stasis, we must constantly relate to the world which creates the conditions for our being, and to our fellow beings who create the conditions for our own becoming.¹¹⁵ We should recognise our capacity to judge the content of our lives as we encounter unexpected contingencies - as we encounter a world that demands re-conceiving and re-organising.

An ecological imperative for knowledge

To this latter end, what is demanded of philosophical enquiry today, as implied by what I have set out above, is its transposition into a less narrowly ambitious, more ecologically attuned register: one that chooses to devote its energy to real life problems of an urgent and unavoidable nature. After all, to be worthy of the name, ‘forms of knowledge should elucidate unremittingly the circumstances of everyday life.’¹¹⁶ This implies the need for an ecological approach to knowledge, as opposed to its currently atomised form of production. Academia is self-evidently stratified into disciplines, themselves divided into increasing areas of specialisation, that treat of phenomena according to their respective dispositions. Although their practitioners may insist otherwise, they evince inculcated, ‘automatic habits of thinking’ derived from the authoritative texts, theories, and methods that orientate specialised research.¹¹⁷ They make use of already approved preconceptions that when applied to the object of study are relied upon to judge its coherence in relation to what is already known about it. To this extent, ‘specialization reinforces the knowledge already known by enforcing – e.g. through conventional methodologies – normative forms of behaviour. Specialization is the essence of disciplinarity. It is a technical and

¹¹⁵ Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 50.

¹¹⁶ Davies, M. L. ‘Disobedience reconsidered: history, theory, and the morality of scholarship’, in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2013), p. 192.

¹¹⁷ Davies, ‘Thinking Practice’, *Breaking the Disciplines*, p. 9.

technocratic form of knowledge-production, a mode of intellectual conformity.’¹¹⁸ Academic disciplines and the methodologies they employ can therefore inhibit the absolutely vital autonomy of thought, of intellectual freedom. Simultaneously, the knowledge they produce frequently affirms, obfuscates, or ignores entirely the socio-political conditions in which its production occurs, discounting the academic’s own location in the system of knowledge production, and hence producing the ‘conceptual contentment’ – the breezy nonchalance – typical of scholasticism.

In this way, unfortunately, the central problem of ecological sense is easily occluded by the reflexive abstractions produced by the prevailing academic disciplines: i.e. academic specialisations, in order to achieve the required clarity and precision, necessarily incur a form of ‘ecological blindness’ caused by operating within an autotelic, ‘methodologically hygienic world.’¹¹⁹ They hence have proved inimical to change to the degree that the knowledge they produce largely serves to satisfy narrow individual research interests, and is by design meant to align with knowledge already known – e.g. the constant demand to refer to others in the field. Instead of wondering whether the knowledge they produce has any bearing on the state of the world, institutionalised, disciplined academics proceed to garner knowledge of uncertain value to human life. Which is precisely why an ‘aesthetic’ approach is necessary:

Aesthetic experience... is a way of going through life. It simultaneously questions, on the one hand, the univocality of *concept* (reconsidered in light of it also necessarily being affect and percept) as well as its definitional and totalizing character, and on the transparency of *sign*, aimed at perfect accordance between words and things, and finally the *symbol*’s tendency towards concordance... Aesthetic experience, in the Greek sense of *aisth sis*, questions submission to this policing of the real. It is insubordinate relative to this fundamentalist conception of a uniformized, normalized, and controlled real. It

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 11.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 21.

frustrates simplifications by introducing perplexity and discordance into thought. It undoes symbolic completeness.¹²⁰

Here, I think, the *ecological* adequacy and implications of a new concept – its implications for the ecology of knowledge – cannot be disclosed using the vocabulary of a single discipline or subset thereof. Nor is the use of that concept within a discipline or multiple disciplines incontrovertible evidence of its merit: it may simply have proved useful for a particular research agenda. How the concept is formulated varies depending upon the disciplinary approach used to understand it (i.e. on what has been *a priori* invested into the mode of conceiving it). Geologists and stratigraphers are interested in the Anthropocene to the extent that it may represent a geological reality, to see whether they can insert a ‘golden spike’ in the rock structures that would enable a clear epochal demarcation to be made. Yet in the event of its geological adoption, this would tell us only that it has been verified by the standards of one particular discipline; a discipline which does not itself have the capacity to think about the validity of the Anthropocene for the wider world since its very design precludes considerations that have no significance for its disciplinary practice. But this is of only peripheral importance in terms of whether the concept assists the human *ecological interest*, which is concerned with whether the ecological system is capable of sustaining human life in the long-term. This central preoccupation informs the ecological approach to knowledge. It understands that:

Knowledge ‘in itself’ consists of ‘invisibles’: opinions, ideas, arguments, theories, technologies, belief-systems, ideologies and the claims made for them by the social and academic managers of knowledge. The ecological interest assesses them in terms of the underlying, bio-political or socio-economic behaviour they quite visibly sustain.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Laplantine, F. *The Life of the Senses: Introduction to a Modal Anthropology*, trans. Furniss, J. (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 122-23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p. 13.

Further, an ecological approach axiomatically depends upon ecological thinking. This necessarily departs from disciplinary injunctions that block its expression.

In Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, she reminds us as to Kant's distinction between intellect (*Verstand*), which is the faculty of cognition, and reason (*Vernunft*). While the intellect 'desires to grasp what is given to the senses', reason 'wishes to understand its *meaning*.'¹²² Thinking, the capacity to reason, allows us to comprehend, while cognition, linked to our various senses, allows us to apprehend what is perceptively grasped. As Kant remarks in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the understanding is our ability to produce representations, and thus 'the faculty... which enables us to **think** the object of sensible intuition is the **understanding**. [...] Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought.'¹²³ Thinking in short enables us to conceive. By extension, it allows us to think things through: meaning a capacity to distinguish what is meaningful and what is not; what is useful and what is superfluous; what is valid and what is invalid. Ecological thinking, resistant to disciplinary coercion and inherently sceptical of what is, of how things are arranged, contemplates with suspicion the conceptual, linguistic arrangements in existence. It enquires, crucially, as to their capacity to mean something, or make sense of anything. Hence, based on 'reflective reason' in contrast to disciplinary reflexes, it 'always returns us to where we are in the world.'¹²⁴ It is always cognizant of the epistemological situation that confronts it.

This is necessary since the human body is part of an ecology, i.e. 'a self-sustaining, self-regulating system' which 'encompasses the brain, its body, and its social and natural

¹²² Arendt, H. *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), p. 57.

¹²³ Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), [B76|A52], p. 86.

¹²⁴ Davies, *Thinking Practice*, p. 15.

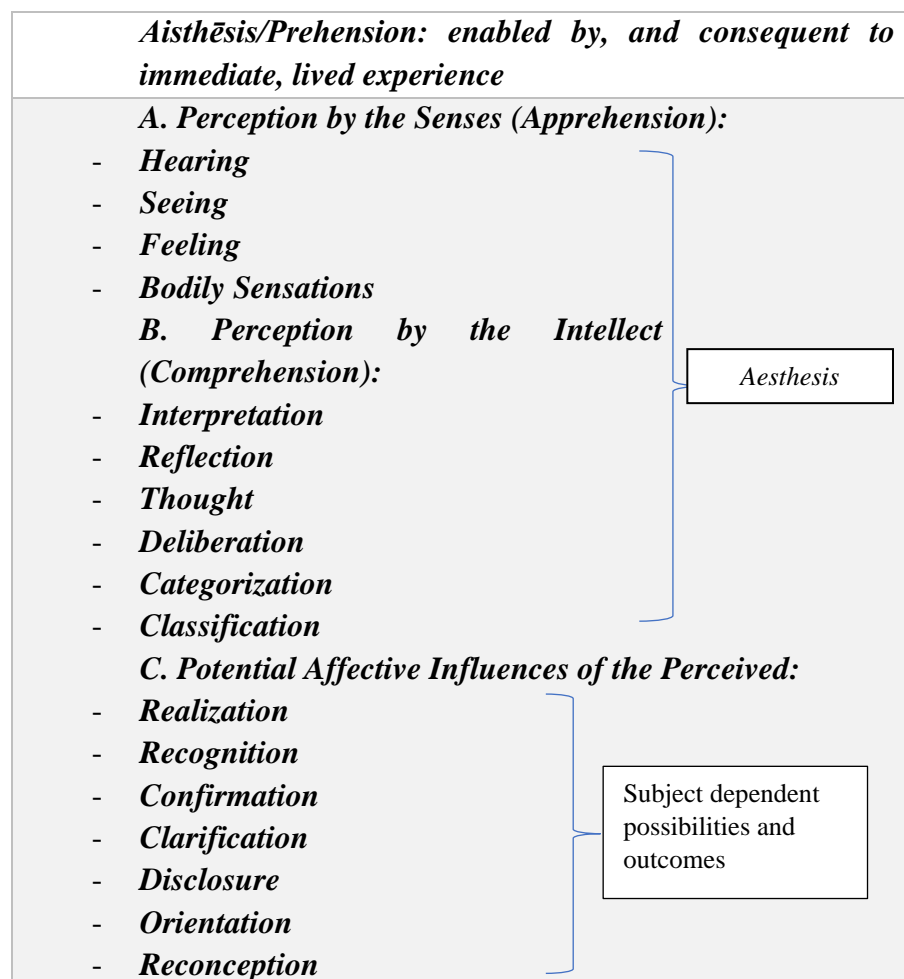
context.’¹²⁵ Seeing the human body as embedded within an ecology – including an ecology of knowledge – forms a starting point, a perspective on what takes priority for human cognition, which depends on a material, reciprocal relationship with the ecological system which sustains the practices that support life. As part of that ecological system, the human body (comprising embodied thinking and physiological processes) anchors and performs the ordinary practices of everyday existence. Physiological processes keep the body functioning; processes which necessitate actions crucial to the maintenance of the entire organism. Fundamentally, it is essential to note that ‘the body is in the social world but the social world is in the body (in the form of *hexis* and *eidōs*). The very structures of the world are present in the structures (or, to put it better, the cognitive schemes) that agents implement in order to understand it.’¹²⁶

Hence the term ‘sense’ – as in the sense of the Anthropocene – is not assigned without reason. Sense and sensing unavoidably foreground the thesis as it is hereby conceived. For it is concerned not just with what the Anthropocene makes historical sense of, but with what having a sense of history would mean in the Anthropocene. Sense is a complex, ambiguous term. It is used here because the object of study is itself ambiguous in point of validity and meaning: i.e. unobvious, unclarified, opaque in terms of its coherence and utility in general. Solely in intellectual, scholastic terms, it raises the primary question of *cognitive legitimacy* (i.e. of what is both justified and true to believe); but it may further prompt the question of the *existential* and *ecological value* – cognitive, moral, political – of the object to be enquired into, and what useful or harmful work it actually does. That is, what encountering it, employing it, and rendering it significant would mean, what commitments and consequences would be engendered in these respects.

¹²⁵ Davies, M. L. & Meskimmon, M. (eds.), *Breaking the Disciplines: Reconceptions in Knowledge, Art and Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 4.

¹²⁶ Bourdieu, P. *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 152.

So in a fuller exposition of the meaning of the term, ‘sense’ can best be considered in terms of *aesthesis*, the Platonic term for sense perception or ‘things perceptible by the senses.’¹²⁷ Here sense perception, Ranciére notes, involves both ‘a faculty that offers the given and a faculty that makes something out of it. For these two faculties the Greek language has only one name, *aesthesis*, the faculty of sense, the capacity to both perceive a given and make sense of it.’¹²⁸ This I set out schematically in the following way:



¹²⁷ Williams, R. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 31.

¹²⁸ Ranciére, J. ‘The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge’, in N. Kompridis (ed.) *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 263.

This schema is a somewhat different rendering to that found in Martin L. Davies' highly innovative work, *Historics* (2006), but is indebted to it. For him, 'apprehension' may be taken to mean our sensation of things as immediately generated through 'feeling', 'remembering', 'thinking', and 'judgement.'¹²⁹ That is, our sensation of the way things are and our capacity to make sense of that sensation is made possible via our aesthetic (which includes intellectual) capacities. Here we understand 'sensation' to extend well beyond the familiar five senses identified by Aristotle in his *De anima* to include, for example, proprioception, exteroception, and interoception:

- I. Proprioceptive senses are the faculties by which we are spatially orientated through the organs of the inner ear and through the use of receptors in the muscles, joints, skin and tendons.
- II. Exteroception is the faculty by which we are made sensitive to stimuli occurring outside our body.
- III. Interoception, conversely, is the faculty by which we are made sensitive to stimuli occurring within our inner organs.

These corporeal capacities are not isolated in their functions as previously supposed – they work together and inform each other, producing multisensory experiences that depend on their cohesion. It is this constant sensory engagement with the world that both enables and informs intellection (comprehension): the process of semiotic organisation giving rise to the formation of a categorical, symbolic order. Here it follows that to sense anything, and to make sense of anything, one must necessarily be existentially and therefore contingently situated since the body constitutes the primary means through which our worldly situation is made known to us. It generates this knowledge through *aesthesis*, which enables the somatic negotiation of daily life. As Borges notices:

We see and hear through memories, fears, expectations. In bodily terms, unconsciousness is a necessary condition of physical acts. Our body knows how to articulate this difficult

¹²⁹ Davies, M. L. *Historics: How History Dominates Contemporary Society* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 252.

paragraph, how to contend with stairways, knots, overpasses, cities... how to procreate, how to breathe, how to sleep, and perhaps how to kill: our body, not our intellect. For us, living is a series of adaptations...¹³⁰

Further, the explanation for this vital ability in ecological terms consists in the fact that the body and the world are each implicated in the other. As Davies says, ‘the world ‘out there’ is already mapped, and continues through experience and reflection to map itself, onto the human mind. Conversely, the world makes sense through the cognitive map the mind projects onto it.’¹³¹

Hence the ‘mind’, Gregory Bateson argues, should not be seen as an isolated unit, as something immanent solely within a human body, but instead as ‘immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology.’¹³² ‘Sensing’ is hence equivalent to an elemental species of knowing, where knowledge thereby functions ‘as a means of self-orientation’ for the body.¹³³ This means that our corporeal knowing must, as an existential imperative, be first and foremost concerned with knowledge of the situation of which we are part. Such knowledge derives from and is grounded in our situated experience, since, as Jaspers remarks, ‘I can neither grasp my situation without proceeding to conceive the world nor grasp the world without a constant return to my situation.’¹³⁴ In order to conceive the world one must first apprehend the situation in which one is already implicated. So at the outset of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels too affirm this unavoidable premiss: the existence of humans in the flesh, bound to and defined by their material, actual life-process: ‘here we ascend from earth to

¹³⁰ Borges, J. L. ‘The Postulation of Reality’, trans. E. Allen, in E. Weinberger (ed.) *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986* (Penguin Books, 1999), p. 61.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³² Bateson, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*, p. 467.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Jaspers, K. *Philosophy: Volume 1, Philosophical World Orientation*, trans. Ashton, E. B. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 106.

heaven.’¹³⁵ By this they mean that we should prioritise not the offspring of our material conditions, the progeny which take the form of conceptions, divinities, ideologies; but proceed to examine these ‘echoes’ after seeing them as responsively arising out of ‘empirically verifiable... material premises.’¹³⁶

On this postulate of the primacy of sense defined as *aesthesis* – as aesthetically derived knowledge – all else must follow. It is an irrefragable postulate, since the immediacy of the conscious body in the world can be nothing other than the precondition on which all things humanly contrived must depend, constituting as it does our ‘mode of real existence’, as Jaspers remarks.¹³⁷ This living body is undeniably of the world, what Merleau-Ponty calls that ‘totality of perceptible things’ which one must first sense to conceive.¹³⁸ And to argue that our knowledge is derived first from the world as it is sensed is to acknowledge the primacy of that already socially constructed, already articulated world which our senses apprehend, the ground of our situation, and of which ‘knowledge always speaks.’¹³⁹ This is necessarily so since ecologically we are ourselves ‘comprehended in the space [we] seek to comprehend.’¹⁴⁰ Thereby, ‘knowledge comes from how we now ‘sense’ the world and how the world now ‘senses’ us [*aesthesis*]; that means it also comes from the conceptions that shape how we ‘sense’ the world and how the ‘sense’ we get of the world shapes our conceptions of it [*illusio*].’¹⁴¹ All human sense, which is to say, all orientation and thus coherence, is inseparable from the sense, or not,

¹³⁵ Marx, K. & Engels, F. *The German Ideology, Parts I & III* (New York: Martino Publishing, 2011), p. 14.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, p. 106.

¹³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, M. ‘The Primacy of Perception’, in Fisher, A. L. (ed.) *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), p. 51.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, ‘What is Phenomenology?’, p. 29.

¹⁴⁰ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ Davies, *Historics*, p. 10.

of our material life-process and our mode of terrestrial dwelling, which Heidegger calls ‘the manner in which mortals are on the Earth.’¹⁴²

The contemporary disenchantment of knowledge

Knowledge is, as I have argued, something social – both the product and basis of our shared and individual intellection, of collaborative insight. I therefore see philosophy as the essential interrogation of established forms of knowledge: a fundamental exploration of the basis, content, and limits of human understanding which at its best facilitates an enduring, indispensable ideal: the emancipation of the human mind from narcissism, conformity, bigotry, intolerance, and hubris. But this aspiration, fundamental to the ecological interest knowledge should have (as I argued above), faces constant challenges. In the Anthropocene, it encounters a world seemingly inimical to its fruition; that turns knowledge against life, and reason against rationality.

This unfortunate situation of knowledge can be compared to the now depleted promise knowledge once had, the liberatory potential traditionally associated with it, as vigorously and passionately argued by the leading intellects of the European Enlightenment. So, in *Enlightenment’s Wake*, his prescient work of political philosophy written in the mid-1990s, John Gray remarks upon the remnants of the Enlightenment project some several centuries in the making and its consequent ‘crisis of legitimacy’:

Our patrimony is the disenchantment which the Enlightenment has bequeathed to us... Contrary to the hopes which buoyed up Enlightenment thinkers throughout the modern period, we find at the close of the modern age a renaissance of particularisms, ethnic and religious. [...] The Enlightenment project of promoting autonomous human reason and of according to science a privileged status in relation to all other forms of understanding has successfully eroded and destroyed traditional forms of moral and social knowledge; it has

¹⁴² Heidegger, M. ‘Building dwelling thinking’, in Krell, D. F. (ed.) *Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 350.

not issued in anything resembling a new civilisation, however, but instead in nihilism [...] The Western humanist and modernist project of subjugating nature... is now being pursued with Weberian rationality through the development of capitalist institutions [which] are ever more chaotic, and elude any form of human accountability or control. The legacy of the Enlightenment project – which is also the legacy of Westernisation – is a world ruled by calculation and wilfulness which is humanly unintelligible and destructively purposeless.¹⁴³

From a vantage point some twenty years in the future, when the ‘humanist and modernist’ project has been comprehensively hijacked by vested interests who in a new ‘Gilded Age’ of widening inequity garner ever larger shares of global wealth, I find it difficult to disagree with Gray’s bleak description. His comments reflect, moreover, an overwhelming sense of disillusionment, of doleful ‘disenchantment’: in other words, he spies the mismatch between the promise of knowledge and what it has produced.

Instead of limiting the satisfaction of self-interest or power, or organising a world in which private interest would not be given unlicensed opportunity to flourish, his summary speaks to today’s alignment of liberalism with predatory, ‘surveillance’ capitalism; to the existence of faceless agglomerations of corporate, financial, and state power marginalising individual agency; and to the calculated frustration of any latent collective capacity to change course through the distribution of propaganda and misinformation. Hence the consequent instability, the ecological inefficacy, in respect to knowledge today occurs both through its highly specialised modes of production, and its increasingly digitalised forms of dissemination. The interface of the individual with mass forms of digital media, with its constant, concurrent, and incompatible flows of information, amplifies the potential for confusion in the social system (hence, to offset the confusion, there follows a retreat into epistemic silos, sealed from outside intrusion and impervious to evidence). Fundamentally, the ‘unintelligible’ nature of the world, of

¹⁴³ Gray, J. *Enlightenment’s Wake* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 217-18.

the forms of behaviour in which humans participate, and which facilitate and maintain socio-economic arrangements inimical to human flourishing, is especially evinced in the perpetuation of these forms of behaviour despite knowing the damage they inflict.

Disenchantment, associated with modernism's machinic harnessing of vast amounts of fossil energy (re-distributed across the globe in the form of commodities), is a psychological phenomenon that emerges at times of socio-economic strife, close on the heels of metamorphoses in our species' technological and economic conditions. As a frequent theme underpinning cultural criticism, it is strongly experienced among the intellectuals and writers of the nineteenth century in response to the development of the mass manufacturing industries and the rise of the modern metropolis. At that time, George Steiner remarks, 'the urban inferno, with its hordes of faceless inhabitants, [haunted] the nineteenth-century imagination.'¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the unprecedented destruction and death of the first half of the last century only increased the frenzied speed at which the mode of society shifted in economic and political terms, giving rise to the ecologically calamitous, but economically beneficial (particularly in terms of living-standards), 'Great Acceleration' mentioned earlier in my introduction.

The stressful ruptures of the last century might confirm that the brooding *ennui* diagnosed by its cultural critics gave rise to tensions that were tragically unleashed. Or perhaps societal conditions, having been subjected to extraordinary rates of change, were internally incapable of containing those 'fantasies of nearing catastrophe.'¹⁴⁵ At any rate, disenchantment is intensely felt, it seems, when normative expectations or hopes are not matched by reality – are perverted by it. It is a symptom of existential and epistemic over-exposure (when our ideas and conceptions are unprepared to deal with novel situations)

¹⁴⁴ Steiner, G. *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 23.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

resulting, I would submit, in a species of frustrated desire, nostalgic longing, and pessimistic boredom. All of which express the dismay that the world is not, perhaps cannot be, other than as it is; or that if it can, the hoped-for dawn – either of a happy return to a long-lost past, or a utopian world of peace and harmony – will arrive too late for us.

To understand Gray's diagnosis, then, one has only to observe the world today: a plurality of populations, ideas, and technologies are breaking up and reforming human experience at extraordinary speed. Our key concepts, our highest values, our most progressive injunctions, haemorrhage meaning at an alarming rate; discredited by events and increasingly unsuited to a world they seem unable any longer to manage or predict. The mind finds it increasingly difficult to recognise, conform to, or make a compact with a world that doesn't persist. In the teeth of ecological collapse, we discover that knowledge, even the staggering quantities already available, seem only to vindicate Cioran's disturbing observation that 'our chief grievance against knowledge is that it has not helped us to live.'¹⁴⁶ Although false on the face of it, this claim resonates in the complacent accumulation of knowledge detached from the self-compromising consequences of its production.

On the contrary, in most domains this bountiful harvest depletes our capacity for personal discretion since most of it is not in our possession, and the capacity for testing its veracity is usually beyond us. Counter-intuitively, as Gloria Origgi points out, its presence depletes our capacity to distinguish between knowledge and its appearance:

There is an underappreciated paradox of knowledge that plays a pivotal role in our advanced hyper-connected liberal democracies: the greater the amount of information that circulates, the more we rely on so-called reputational devices to evaluate it. What makes

¹⁴⁶ Cioran, E. M. *The Fall into Time*, translated by Howard, R. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 44.

this paradoxical is that the vastly increased access to information and knowledge we have today does not empower us or make us more cognitively autonomous. Rather, it renders us more dependent on other people's judgments and evaluations of the information with which we are faced.¹⁴⁷

Increasingly dependent on informants with whom we are rarely personally acquainted, and whose credentials are often obscure, our autonomy is undermined as more decisions about what to believe, and which forms of knowledge to sanction, must be outsourced to other people based on their reputation. That is, on the degree of credibility they are said to possess in their field of expertise or knowledge specialism, their occupation of which is supposed to grant them legitimacy. Specialisation has in this way enfeebled, even disabled, 'the emphasis of first-hand intuition.'¹⁴⁸

Central to the ability of society, for instance, to reproduce its forms of life, the education system exists to pass on the appropriate (i.e. governmentally approved and legitimated) knowledge that would ensure proper and complete insertion into the increasingly defunct 'knowledge economy'; to repopulate and perpetuate the current system with likeminded automatons. So, as a result of the mismatch between the knowledge socially known and the knowledge ecologically needed, the atrophying state of ecological affairs is a reflection as well as a material consequence of the instrumental priorities towards which knowledge is directed. These priorities are ordained by the market economy, the neoliberal values of which are reproduced and promoted through the dissemination of the now compromised knowledge which maintains it as a system. Such knowledge is compromised insofar as it cannot help but adhere to the prevailing injunctions of capital. It betrays its inadequacy, its decreasing usefulness, as the gap

¹⁴⁷ Origgi, G. 'Say goodbye to the information age: its's all about reputation now', in *Aeon*. Online webpage. Accessed April 30th 2018. <https://aeon.co/ideas/say-goodbye-to-the-information-age-its-all-about-reputation-now>

¹⁴⁸ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 224.

between the urgencies of now and the capacity to address them grows wider. These antiquated intellectual reflexes are choked by a remarkable complacency: the loss of sense in the natural and intellectual ecology barely registers as an indictment of their own incoherence.

This contradicts, or sets up epistemic conditions which cannot help but frustrate, Kant's exhortation, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, to use one's natural faculties in the interests of enlightenment:

A human being has a duty to himself to cultivate (*cultura*) his natural powers (powers of spirit, mind, and body), as means to all sorts of possible ends. He owes it to himself (as a rational being) not to leave idle and, as it were, rusting away the natural predispositions and capacities that his reason can someday use.¹⁴⁹

For Kant, the cultivation of these natural powers, which 'should take precedence and in what proportion', is left to the individual to determine: these are 'matters left for him to choose in accordance with his own rational reflection about what sort of life he would like to lead.'¹⁵⁰ But it is clear that for human beings the cultivation of their natural powers has a general end apart from deciding what everyday trade or activity to which they will devote themselves, which is the duty to oneself 'to be a useful member of the world.'¹⁵¹ What one decides to do and in what manner has a bearing upon the worth and standing of all humanity, since it is not only to one's own advantage that one cultivates one's powers, but so that one can be 'equal to the end of his existence.'¹⁵²

Indeed, for Kant enlightenment consisted in the public exercise of reason. This prescriptive aspect seeks to inform us as to its conditions or grounds. To obtain it, Kant prescribes freedom; namely the 'freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all

¹⁴⁹ Kant, I. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, edited by Gregor, M. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 194.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

matters.’¹⁵³ Using one’s reason in public ‘must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.’¹⁵⁴ The capacity to use one’s reason freely in public constitutes a discretionary power over one’s thinking: a freedom to confidently emerge from our usual ‘lack of resolution and courage’ and make full use of our understanding ‘without the guidance of another.’¹⁵⁵ Enlightenment, as a work in progress, offers a hope that one day, ‘men as a whole can be in a position [to use] their own understanding confidently.’¹⁵⁶ Each individual is thereby required, in the course of human life, ‘to contribute towards this progress to the best of his ability’; a progress which in historical terms tends, in Kant’s opinion, towards the better rather than the worse.¹⁵⁷

But these capacities on which enlightenment depends seem today to be more inadequate than ever. Far from disclosing any directional, univocal process or hidden ‘plan of nature’, as Kant hoped, the investigation of human affairs instead admits of an array of incompatible views concerning their character, let alone purpose. In a global *milieu* of increasingly amplified technological potential constantly thwarting human self-comprehension and endangering human existence (through biosphere degradation, antimicrobial resistance, global warming, and reckless biogenetic research, etc.) any extant or imagined epistemological coherence or progressive historical ethos is subsumed into a scatter-shot, self-compromising chronology of chaos, which must deal increasingly in epistemic disjunction, dissymmetry, discrepancy, and dissolution.

On a geological scale, after all, the Anthropocene marks the official emergence of a comprehensively ‘humanised’ planet, terraformed in the human interest through scientific instrumentation. Accordingly, ecological endangerment is but the primary

¹⁵³ Kant, I. ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’ in *Political Writings*, edited by Reiss, H. S. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 55.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁵⁶ Kant, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, p. 58.

¹⁵⁷ Kant, ‘Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History’, in *Political Writings*, p. 234.

symptom of the extension of the logic of gratuitous consumption applied to each and every object. This globalisation of human operations, which is synonymous with destruction as well as economic growth, paradoxically engenders the eradication of any comprehensive sense of the world from within as well as from without. It instigates, as such, ‘the conjunction of an indefinite growth of techno-science, of a correlative exponential growth of populations, of a worsening of inequalities of all sorts within these populations – economic, biological, and cultural – and of a dissipation of the certainties, images and identities of what the world was.’¹⁵⁸ It inaugurates the construction of a reality that is now too complex, too elusive, for the human mind to comprehend or manage.

Since, as I have established, ‘the meaning of the world does not occur as a reference to something external to the world’ (e.g. from a theological or transcendental vantage point), its ‘sense’ is neither behind nor outside it but is implicated in its very conception.¹⁵⁹ The sense of the world, in other words, is inseparable from the sense of the planet: so long as the planet has sense, has *ecological coherence*, it is a place in which a human world might be maintained. But the Anthropocene elides the very distinction between a ‘natural’ earth and a ‘human’ world, signalling the intrusion of each into the other, merging them into a monstrous hybrid whereupon ‘contemporary social structures and technologies have become unmanageable as a consequence of their scale and complexity.’¹⁶⁰ This is symptomised through the techno-science that implements the acceleration of time and the endless proliferation of information, giving rise to a confusing ‘multiplication of ‘points of view.’’¹⁶¹ Further, and detrimental to our powers

¹⁵⁸ Nancy, J-L. *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 34.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 43.

¹⁶⁰ Biro, A. (ed.), *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and the Contemporary Environmental Crisis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 5.

¹⁶¹ Virilio, P. *The Information Bomb* (London & New York: Verso, 2005) p. 18.

of discretion, technological proficiency appears to make us blind to the very conditions which enable it, becoming ‘thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technologically possible.’¹⁶² Most importantly, through our acquiescence to the ‘institutions and structures of industrial-technological society’, ‘what we are in danger of losing is political control over our destiny.’¹⁶³ *Simultaneously* (and this really constitutes the defining contradiction of the Anthropocene), the ecological impoverishment of the planet, or biocide, with both human and non-human repercussions, demonstrates with frightening clarity that ‘it is in our power, with our technology, to create insanity in the larger system of which we are parts.’¹⁶⁴ Loss of control clashes, paradoxically, with the continued capacity to create ecological chaos.

Climate change through carbon emissions, species extinction on a vast scale, and environmental pollution consequently render us apprehensive in the knowledge that these developments will leave swathes of the planet uninhabitable. They reinforce even further the human and non-human vulnerability to our own technological and intellectual prostheses, producing for ourselves ‘the apocalyptic foreclosure’ of our own existence.¹⁶⁵ Even now, after the illusion of us being a fully ‘autonomous’ and ‘discrete’ species is well and truly debunked, the earth of which we are an indubitable part is still treated as an expendable appendage.¹⁶⁶

Painfully, then, it’s incumbent upon us to recognise we ‘live in a world which makes no ecological sense’, being subjected to the mismanagement of techno-science and entranced by ‘the normative activity it enforces.’¹⁶⁷ There is no discernible sense (life

¹⁶² Arendt, H. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 3.

¹⁶³ Taylor, C. *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1991), pp. 8 & 10.

¹⁶⁴ Bateson, G. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 473.

¹⁶⁵ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 85.

¹⁶⁶ Pettman, D. *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 36.

¹⁶⁷ Davies, ‘Thinking Practice’ pp. 18-19.

sustaining legitimacy or coherence) in what is being demanded of the ecological system. Hence the habits of thought, knowledge, and normative behaviour that together comprise the world as it is are characterised fundamentally by an internal non-sense:

Thinking has reason to be dismayed... This late age, with world wars, economic collapse, genocide, nuclear deterrence, industrial-technological expansion, has *already* irremediably jeopardized not just the natural but the intellectual ecology. The human world itself, as an ecological entity, has already become antiquated. In this situation it would be difficult for any *a priori* sense to survive.¹⁶⁸

We may take this to mean that the intellectual ecology that props up the human species, consisting of various frames through which we are supposed to make sense of things, is inadequate to orientate us: to make things make sense. It is out of joint because there exists a disjunction between the world as it has been intellectually set up and the kind of intellectual ecology we now require. Self-referentially caught in its own redundancy, this ecology is resistant to reforming itself. This in turn blocks the structural, ecological change we need. For example, there is no doubt that global capitalism has enabled a reduction in poverty and encourages often desirable medical and technological innovations in various fields. We hear constantly of its achievements. Concurrently, its ‘anonymous and impersonal’ global markets with their attendant bureaucratic organisation are structurally and morally unsound: breeding vast accumulations in wealth within a small global elite; causing devastating fluctuations in prosperity and well-being via sporadic economic depression; overseeing ‘unprecedented levels’ in inequality even as ‘aggregate human wealth’ increases.¹⁶⁹ The burden of posterity current and successive generations must shoulder takes the form of disorientation; one of the key indications of which is a disenchanting incapacity to manage what is going on.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁶⁹ Biro, ‘Introduction’, *Critical Ecologies*, p. 5.

Apparently, the production of more and more knowledge is aimed at compensating for the ‘justified sense of chaos, of cognitive breakdown’ endemic in human affairs, but which was itself induced, paradoxically, by ‘the simultaneous collapse and the unprecedented growth of knowledge. The collapse meant that we quite literally ceased to know just which world we lived in.’¹⁷⁰ Therefore, here and now (claims Gellner), ‘a real historical situation has imposed a certain task on thought. We do *not* know just which world we inhabit. Diverse faiths and visions claim to tell us. Their confidence, motives, and logic are suspect.’¹⁷¹ This disenchantment is a problem of orientation – namely the loss of it. The severity of the loss corresponds, I might venture, to the epistemic inadequacy of the concepts on which it was formerly founded, insofar as knowledge is supposed to help us to live. But today’s disenchantment reflects a more and more dangerous world: one rendered both epistemologically and ontologically unstable, even existentially untenable insofar as it has become harder to identify ‘the relationship of knowledge to the reality it is meant to explain.’¹⁷² It has become a place where ‘the *devaluation* of the human world grows in direct proportion to the *increase in value* of the world of things’, as Marx described one of its alienating symptoms.¹⁷³

One of the most curious aspects of the Anthropocene in epistemological terms, then, is that while it seems to conveniently set up the world as *a priori* knowable in human terms because human beings have both created *and* named it, it uncovers a striking lacuna between the knowledge known and the knowledge needed. Or rather, the knowledge now known, it suggests, if not yet wholly redundant, is rapidly becoming so because it no

¹⁷⁰ Gellner, E. *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 202-3.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷² Davies, M. L. ‘Thinking practice: on the concept of an ecology of knowledge’, in *Breaking the Disciplines: Reconceptions in Knowledge, Art, & Culture*, edited by Davies, M. L. & Meskimmon, M. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁷³ Marx, K. ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 323-24.

longer does what knowledge in theory ought to do. For instance, one of the thorniest moral and political problems facing democratic politics is that it seems incapable of moving fast enough or decisively enough to mitigate the worst excesses of capitalism and reorganise the system of production, which raises the unsavoury prospect of needing, ultimately, to bypass democratic mandates altogether – precisely because the knowledge the population holds at large is inadequate to the world they inhabit. The knowledge they have holds out promises of a material and political nature the world is less and less able to keep. As such, with every attempt to bridge this epistemic gap with knowledge better suited to the past, the time horizon of human species existence, while in principle open, further contracts. It has become constrained by our forms of energy consumption, our reliance on forms of behaviour themselves antiquated.

One could speculate that the establishment of the Anthropocene concept, although itself epistemically impotent in isolation, serves an important ‘consciousness raising’ function by providing a way of describing what cannot be *directly* understood by the average participant in the ‘ecology’ of knowledge; something that can condense the essence of the ontological destabilisation going on all around them in a single soundbite. It’s true that there are times when we need abstractions, even though by definition abstractions necessarily leave things out – they cannot say or acknowledge everything. As Gellner points out:

The only possible strategy when facing a situation of total or near-total bewilderment is a monistic one: choose some point, and try to recover a coherent picture by building anew, using it as a base... the new starting-point must somehow be self-sustaining, self-guaranteeing, independent of any further bases... to possess a reliability which did not, for once, presuppose something else... ¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*, p. 13.

It is evident that in the figure of *Anthropos* the Anthropocene proffers a monistic principle around which the world can be (re)orientated: a recursive, foundational principle akin to God, Spirit, or History. For without this orientating principle, without possessing a conception of the whole of reality in advance, we cannot seem to get a grip on the now distinctly human difficulties that arise in the course of everyday life. With the human offering the ultimate circumscription of life as a whole, in which it becomes both centre and periphery, cause and effect, inside and outside, the Anthropocene heralds on its face the final move in a long series of moves to try and shift the locus of epistemic authority to the human mind.

But here both the promise and liability of this coercive identitary move, of this ultimate expression of the identity principle, arises to haunt the human imagination, since the search for knowledge has become as much a centripetal movement inwards (investigating our inner reasons and motivations and beliefs), as a centrifugal movement outwards in pursuit of those mystical 'clear and distinct' ideas against which the human could be measured; against which its tyrannical reign could be identified, opposed, resisted. Although the Anthropocene seems to reconfirm the human at the centre of all things, by concurrently closing down the possibility of escaping ourselves, it leaves the human mind alone and facing itself, mired in its own redundancy.

2. 'The Metamorphosis of the World into Man'

By its nature, the human mind is indeterminate; hence, when man is sunk in ignorance, he makes himself the measure of the universe.

Giambattista Vico¹

Humanity: the measure of reality

Today, instead of identity being immediately, unquestioningly derived from an encounter with the divine, or the nation, or other forms of traditional authority, it falls to the individual human mind to be the final arbiter of its self-identity in a world replete with conflicting values and incompatible mythologies from which one can choose *à la carte*. Consequently, identity – in political, religious, ethnic, national, and sexual forms – has never been more slippery and contested a concept; and is for this reason stridently asserted and jealously defended against those perceived to encroach upon, or endanger, any attempt to secure it. Yet unfortunately, anxiety and doubt are the subsequent symptoms of identity reconstituted as a perpetual task or ongoing process of personal re-evaluation. As Anthony Giddens writes:

In the reflexive project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile. The task of forging a distinct identity may be able to deliver distinct psychological gains, but it is clearly also a burden. A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions.²

In such circumstances, contemporary knowledge would appear to confront an unprecedented imperative to be meaningful; to alleviate the discordance of modern

¹ Vico, *The New Science*, p. 75.

² Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Blackwell: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 185-86.

uncertainty; to more rigorously coordinate human life. But the conceptual capacity to make the different elements of life cohere, to re-conceptualise for them some verifiable method of felicity and security, to ensconce them within a narrative of progressive human enlightenment, has appeared for some time to be not only intellectually unfashionable but logistically impossible. The recognition of contingency and the plurality of incommensurate human experiences co-existing uncomfortably together comes at the expense of collective moral and political visions – in liberalism taken to its logical conclusion, identity is all and the self is ultimate. So unsurprisingly, in a situation where knowledge is commodified; its production stratified and engineered within tightly siloed disciplines that look out for their own interests and have little or nothing to do with one another; whose manufacturers remain largely ignorant of knowledge produced elsewhere (that is, splintered into countless camps and factions, and sub-sub-disciplines, all with their respective thought-styles and conventions determining what counts as knowledge); one might well wonder whether this system is capable of articulating any convincing – let alone meaningful – moral and political vision of where we are and where we ought to be going. We lack, accordingly, a universally persuasive image of the world; a symbol that would reframe the diversity of contemporary existence in the terms of some ethically and politically coherent explanatory scheme.

Nevertheless, and as demonstrated by recent political events in which misty conceptions of freedom and self-determination loom large, in late capitalism many experience a gnawing ‘nostalgia for the absolute’, as George Steiner calls it; perhaps in particular a yearning for the unilateral, unencumbered power of the nation state, cultural and ethnic homogeneity within it, and insulation from the disruptive effects of an interwoven globalised economy.³ But Steiner more particularly meant nostalgia for a

³ Steiner, G. *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2004).

world governed by the security of religious and secular myths on which the meaning of life could be staked; myths to which worldly events would necessarily conform and from which they would derive their meaning. In a world in which such myths exerted real authority and inspired absolute conviction, nostalgic and reactionary efforts to reassert them through popular political action would be unnecessary. The absolution offered by an omnipotent deity; the belonging supplied by an indivisible identity bestowed from birth; and the shared background of moral and political beliefs orientating the ideal of some promised land beyond that of wage slavery and acquisitive consumption have all been shaken: ruptured by the ideational fragmentation inflicted by the incessant production and circulation of knowledge, and displaced by mutations induced by the geographical movement of people, goods, and services across national borders. Today we recognise multiple modes of human experience; an unmistakable divergence in the means of existential orientation.

Arising out of this general background condition and constituting more than merely a hypothetical periodisation in planetary history, the Anthropocene, I contend, constitutes a well-intentioned yet coercive *identitary proposition*. Evidently, as my preamble suggests, orientation in the world relies upon identity: upon a capacity to recognise where and what we are, to affirm we are who we say we are. According to the identity principle ($A = A$), things are logically identical to themselves, but identitary propositions possess a broader connective, *integrative* power. They offer a capacity to discern or declare likenesses between things; to make them the same, to make them identical. Hence the Anthropocene, explicitly orientated around the figure of *Anthropos*, or ‘man’, symbolically serves to identify the existential situation and *historical context* (itself the categorical parameter of possibility, the apprehension of which forms the precondition for human understanding) of not only the human species but the entire planet. It attributes

sameness, likeness, similitude – the essential ingredients of identity – to phenomena dissimilar in nature. It is therefore a *comprehensive tautology* that automatically ensures both mind and world, nature and culture, are identical, and so brought within the seemingly ineluctable, techno-managerial remit of human knowledge and control.

Conceptualisations of greater comprehensiveness (the Anthropocene again) are particularly useful – although often overbearing and occlusive – illusions insofar as a much wider variety of phenomena can be placed in the same reference class. Here, particularly through the rhetorical strategy of amplification (*amplificatio*), described by Quintilian, ‘one thing is magnified in order to effect a corresponding augmentation elsewhere.’⁴ In this case, the human is magnified to an extent universal in scope, such that the more the human is emphasised the more it appears the only thing capable of making sense of anything. An effort to come to terms with novelty, the Anthropocene exemplifies the ‘amplified discourse’ reflective of the effort to bridge the gap between representation and reality. Indeed, amplified discourse, Davies notes, is ‘tuned to expansion, aspiration, lack of constriction, open-endedness, absence of finality, transcendence. It sets up discursive structures that affirm an anticipated, indefinite generality over present arbitrary and misguided circumstances.’⁵ In this way, the Anthropocene is a term of *self-reference* of sufficient breadth capable, in principle, of coordinating the incompatible elements that constitute the world we inhabit.

Applying a different label to a thing or situation doesn’t immediately change, in itself, the nature of the thing or situation in question. What a generalised sign or label does is identify the nature or character of the subject’s situation; generalising that situation, in the case of the Anthropocene, to a degree universal for all subjects. In their capaciousness

⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book XIII, translated by H. E. Butler, (London: William Heinemann, 1922), p. 271.

⁵ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 130.

generalisations act as cognitive shortcuts – they contain an immediate capacity to identify, and hence encapsulate, the ontological and existential form the world takes. It becomes circular, since its justification rests on a reality already generalised into the form the concept or categorisation implies. The proposition ‘we live in the Anthropocene’ becomes true based on its relation of fit to certain indisputable facts about the world since its truth is not solely dependent on the properties of the proposition or sentence in which it appears. It bears a relation to reality because of the intentional stance of its proponents, for whom it is a ‘fitting’ name for reality. But the apparently totalising fit is deceptive: the concept is not determinate; it doesn’t determine, let alone stabilise, the future form of reality, but is only (controversially) reflective of it.

This circularity, and hence potential meaninglessness, comes out in how the meaning of the term or generalised description is determined by reference to the same generality it purports to make sense of. In other words, the Anthropocene is so general or universally applicable in form that it merely ends up talking about, referencing, or referring to itself. This problem of self-reference, in which both meaning and understanding are forced into a recursive loop, is an unfortunate consequence of exactly the type of generalised conception the Anthropocene is, since any generalisation general enough will say something about itself. Formally, then, the Anthropocene is *conceptually inert*.

Nietzsche’s incisive reflections on anthropomorphism, on the hubris of human consciousness and its insatiable capacity to project itself onto its surroundings, are relevant here. In ‘On truth and lies in a non-moral sense’, he observes that ‘man builds with [...] delicate conceptual material which he first has to manufacture from himself. In this he is greatly to be admired, but not on account of his drive for truth or for pure knowledge of things. When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such

seeking and finding'.⁶ Placing the human behind every subsequent conceptualisation of the world, the Anthropocene ensures the 'tautological redundancy' of a 'self-identical humanity', since, unable to move outside itself, humanity makes itself the measure of all things.⁷ As Nietzsche further remarks:

At bottom, what the investigator of such truths is seeking is only the *metamorphosis of the world into man*. He strives to understand the world as something *analogous* to man, and at best he achieves by his struggles the *feeling of assimilation*. Similar to the way in which astrologers considered the stars to be in man's service and connected with his happiness and sorrow, such an investigator considers the entire universe in connection with man: the entire universe as the infinitely fractured echo of one original sound-man; the entire universe as the infinitely multiplied copy of one original picture-man. His method is to treat *man as the measure of all things*, but in doing so he again proceeds from the error of believing that he has these things immediately before him as mere objects (my emphasis).⁸

As Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* says: 'Go *measure* earth, weigh air, and state the tides' (my emphasis); hence affirming the conviction of man the measure. Therefore, 'the proper study of mankind is man'; can only *be* man.⁹ But the world of which man is the measure becomes in the Anthropocene a source of self-loathing and self-alienation – made by man, the world that man measures merely condemns him to self-sameness, to self-equivalence. Comprehension is reduced to a process of enforced self-identification that assimilates everything to man.

So in precisely this respect, I think, the tautology of the Anthropocene incarcerates: humanity affirms its inability to escape from itself; anxiously sequestered in a disintegrating, self-replicating world of its own fabrication. It is forever forced,

⁶ Nietzsche, F. 'On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense'. Accessed online, 20th March 2019.

http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file_7421.pdf

⁷ Davies, M. L. 'The Proper Study of Mankind: Enlightenment and Tautology', p. 262.

⁸ Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies'.

⁹ Pope, Alexander, *Essay on Man*. Accessed online, 20th March 2019.

<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/pope-e2.html>

unfortunately, to identify itself with the world its historical action – not to mention its impressive stock of self-knowledge – has produced. I therefore venture that the Anthropocene is a misguided attempt to compensate, through providing a shared ontological frame of reference, for the sense deficit and uncertainty inherent in modern existence, and reflects a contemporary anxiety concerning the legitimation of personal and political identity insofar as it functions to historically resituate the human species as planetary managers in a world humanly unmanageable; in particular, planetary managers whose capacity to manage things is diminished; facing a world whose human management has resulted in obscene and tragic loss of life. But if we are at last the managers of this planet, if we cannot therefore outsource responsibility for its condition, we are left to contemplate the self-subjection implicit in the internal redundancy of the Anthropocene. We are left to consider the tautologically binding thought-style reinforced by this latest world-image, in which the world morphs, irretrievably, into ‘man’.

What’s in a world?

Being subject to temporal contingency always restricts us to partial understanding no matter where we are situated. As material beings who are part of this planet, whose ‘whole experience is composed out of our relationships to the rest of things’, we are subject to similar physical constraints as other mammals.¹⁰ So to reiterate the premise set forth earlier: sense, or *aesthesis*, relates to perception: both physiological (apprehension) and intellectual (comprehension). The subject undergoes experiences according to the kind of world which they physically encounter and the intellectual means or symbolic

¹⁰ Whitehead, p. 31.

supports through which those experiences are processed and categorised. But what sort of thing is this ‘world’ the subject encounters? What underpins its existence?

Although the planet would exist in the absence of human inhabitants to observe it, it is far from clear that such a thing as a world could exist at all in our absence. This is especially so if we take the ‘world’ as denoting a collective human project; hence giving the notion a ring of experiment or conquest about it. Thus we may take it to be fundamentally *organisational* and therefore political in intent, inasmuch as it traces out an ontological order beyond which our lives take on less and less significance. Hence the ‘world’ is itself ‘never more than an image, a regulative idea, a normative concept for planning and implementing a global society.’¹¹ It loosely refers to the fabrication of a certain kind of reality constructed by the human mind, for the human mind. A world of human construction naturally implies human minds collectively working to maintain a reality that serves whatever interests they find not only necessary to pursue, such as the obtainment of food, clothing, shelter, and companionship, but whatever interests which may be surplus to these.

A ‘perfect grasp’ of this world would require a supernatural capacity to acquire the mythological Archimedean point: an objective view from nowhere, perhaps even outside time itself, from which the world could be observed in its entirety. But in reality, we cannot talk of a world apart from our means of description, or frames of reference, and such frames, Goodman notes, ‘seem to belong less to what is described than to systems of description... If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described.’¹²

¹¹ Kamper, D. & Wulf, C. *Looking Back on the End of the World* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 1.

¹² Goodman, N. *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 2-3.

Clearly, language has already generated a large number of signs through which only particular kinds of worlds have been conceived. Certain signs offer ideational frames which attempt a type of ontological unification. Hence there is a sense of this concept as purely a means of containment for that which exists, or rather is perceived to exist according to the frame in which it implicitly or explicitly appears. It consists in what has been named, in what has been classified, whereby the world is considered the sum of whatever is recorded within it – as I suggested earlier.

But while its correlates ‘planet’, ‘globe’, and even ‘earth’ tend to express a detached, cosmological view of an isolated ‘pale blue dot’ (as named in the famous photograph taken by *Voyager 1* in 1990) orbiting within a remote solar system, ‘world’ brings to mind the human body in possession of a *world-view* by virtue of its being located within the contours of the familiarity of its world situation. For it is in the context of a pre-packaged world-view (i.e. a symbolic frame; a system of description; a conceptual scheme) as well as by means of it (as their means of orientation) that the human subject works out their significance in the world their world-view ‘contains’. That is, a world-view offers a conception of the ontological content and future potentiality of the world, and in what relation the mind stands to it. It comprises conceptions of its existential origin and development, its eschatological or secular purpose, and perhaps its projected ending beyond that of any human participant. We can therefore claim that a world is an impossibility except by means of a world-view that renders it coherent and amenable to expression. And thereby to control, to prediction.

Therefore, ‘world’ may further function as that which arises out of, and stands in for, the collective fabrications of humanity brought under a world-view to the degree that ‘it is possible to conceive of a human world in the sense of a man-made artifice erected on

the earth under the condition of the oneness of man.’¹³ Thus Arendt postulates a necessary affinity between human beings insofar as they must live together on earth and fabricate the means of subsisting in regard to each other. A world then ‘is’ only to the degree that action and speech require a plurality wherein the individuals that constitute that plurality, although ontologically distinct, come to know what each other are doing and thinking. A world would in this sense be necessarily something political; it invokes and arises out of an awareness of our ‘mutual immanence.’¹⁴ This generates a spatial and temporal category; a cohesive picture or model that brings things together; that involves the relation of different elements; that juxtaposes different objects under a single view.

In addition to its political, organisational overtones, however, a world can be called a *habitus*: that is, the cumulative propensities, dispositions, and practises which are integral to human social organisation and ensure its order. So any sense that the Anthropocene might possess depends upon the ‘sense’ of the world as we have fabricated it; from the ontological and epistemological conditions that make its articulation possible. Certainly, humans are part of the world and as such at least partly share their sense of it with other organisms. But we are grounded within a world that mainly derives its sense, for us, from a social structure that is constitutive of our particular mode of being-in-the-world. The socialised body, operating in accord with its corporeal knowledge and endowed with the cognitive schemata to which it is socially exposed and thereby acquires, is conditioned by and an outcome of its world. That is, we generally feel at home in the world because the world as it is socially constructed is also in us.¹⁵ For Bourdieu, our ‘relation to the world is a relation of presence in the world; of being in the

¹³ Arendt, H. ‘The Tradition of Political Thought’, in J. Kohn (ed.) *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 61.

¹⁴ Whitehead, A. N. *Adventures of Ideas* (Pelican Books, 1942), p. 234.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, P. *Pascalian Meditations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 143.

world, in the sense of belonging to the world, being possessed by it.¹⁶ Because the human body is an extension of the world and presupposes its habitability, the loss of a habitable, coherent world entails the loss of the existential meaning it makes possible.

Indeed, in his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Benjamin observes that in the breathless fluctuations of modernity man is 'increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience.'¹⁷ We may suppose him to mean that at the level of ordinary experience, the ways of thinking commonly employed to make that experience familiar are insufficient to accommodate and account for new knowledge; knowledge arising out of enquiries that themselves cannot be undertaken except from outside the bounds of ordinary discourse. Once generated and fed back into experience, it is found that the vast assortment of knowledge impinging on the means that formerly assured us of its stability proves lethal to any sense of predictability or control. This knowledge of unascertainable value, often extraneous to human requirements, renders the world less stable.

This effacement of rationality due to the effacement of ideational coherence is its consequence, as Wells remarks: 'life is already most wonderfully arbitrary and experimental, and for the coming century this must be its essential social history, a great drifting and unrest of people, a shifting and regrouping and breaking up again of groups, great multitudes seeking to find themselves...'¹⁸ For after all, he notes, 'we have seen that the essential process arising out of the growth of science and mechanism, and more particularly out of the still developing facilities of locomotion and communication science has afforded, is the deliquescence of the social organisations of the past.'¹⁹ So,

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁷ Benjamin, W. 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', trans. Zohn, H., in Arendt, H. (ed.) *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 158. (155-200)

¹⁸ Wells, H. G. *Anticipations: On the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), pp. 78-9.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 138.

given that a capacity to experience the world in the totality of its data is non-existent, we well might wonder what it would mean, in Benjamin's phrase, to 'assimilate the data of the world', and whether this would be desirable. It may simply function as a forlorn faith in the *logos*, in the sacred capacity of the word to articulate a final synthesis. Indeed, specialised discourses employing pre-emptive narrative structures have sought to impose on the assorted occurrences of the world an impression of sense, whereby, as Mannheim points out, 'the totality of events are articulated into a process'.²⁰ In so doing, they attempt to bring into existence not only a coherent world, but a world amenable to human coherence. In providing a means of access to it and a place within it such structures secure the individual within an allotted identity that is caught up in the linear 'current' or 'flow' of time.

The inner resources of our moral and political vocabularies, those world views that have served to orientate humankind, have historically been engaged in making human life and its changes meaningful, coherent, manageable, and, especially, its advancement worthwhile to pursue as a universal project; as an experiment in extending the horizon of human possibility to the furthest experiential and existential reaches of the planet and beyond. Accepting this, I argue that the Anthropocene as a world view, in this tradition, figures as a means of *compensation* for the sense deficit concomitant to the ravages of modern existence by implicating, imbricating, and incorporating everyone within it. But this form of compensation, comprehensive in scope, requires a metaphysical principle indispensable to achieve its realisation.

Identity: a central, existential strategy

²⁰ Mannheim, K. *Ideology and Utopia*, translated by Wirth L. & Shils, E. (New York: Harvest Books, 1936), p. 21.

Unmentioned earlier, but underpinning the possibility of human knowledge, understanding through the symbolic system (particularly if it aims to be *comprehensive*) depends upon a crucial premise: namely, that the world *is* intelligible to the human mind; that the mind really does possess an affinity with the world it inhabits. Understanding presumes that mind and world converge or cohere in such a way that the former can comprehend the latter. So classically, for Descartes, the mind of man is *adequate* to the task of knowing the material world because he is created by God and endowed with a capacity for rational enquiry. Moreover, due to God's benevolence, he concludes, the world is so constructed that man is able to know it. And it is precisely this appeal to *identity* which forms one of the fundamental principles of thought. It grounds the premise of intelligibility on which comprehension relies. For the presumption that there exists a relation of conformity, a fundamental congruence between word and object, thought and being, mind and world, is predicated on the *identity principle*. This tautological principle ($A = A$) is, as Davies remarks, 'an expression of self-consciousness, since subjectivity knows itself, becomes real for itself, only by means of the significances through which it duplicates itself, reflects itself, and confirms itself.'²¹

Thus the identity principle on which so much of our thinking depends consists in the idea that the mind can make the world intelligible because it is congruent with it: the mind possesses an intrinsic capacity to know the world, to identify itself with it. This capacity has been affirmed over the past several millennia by the most influential thinkers of the Western intellectual tradition. Therefore, for Parmenides, 'the *same thing* is there for thinking and for being'.²² Aristotle testifies to the existence of a 'first mover' who guarantees the *a priori* relation of identity between thought and object: 'thought thinks

²¹ Davies, M. L. *Imprisoned by History: Aspects of Historicized Life* (New York & London: Routledge, 2010), p. 60.

²² Parmenides of Elea, *Fragments*, translated by Gallop, D. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 57

on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are *the same*.²³ In other words, as he says elsewhere, the truth of a statement consists in its ‘*correspondence with fact*’.²⁴ For Aquinas also, the true concerns ‘precisely *conformity*, or the *adequation* of the thing and the intellect.’²⁵ Bacon remarks that ‘the truth of being and the truth of knowing are *one*, differing no more than the direct beam and the beam reflected’.²⁶ Locke asserts that we cannot ‘talk of knowledge itself, but by the help of those faculties, which are *fitted* to apprehend even what knowledge is’.²⁷ Likewise, Kant contends that truth involves ‘the *agreement* of knowledge with its object’ (my emphases).²⁸ Indeed, to forsake this belief, Davies points out, would entail ‘doubting the adequacy of the mind to make existence intelligible, of human knowledge to manage the world it itself has created’.²⁹ Thus reflecting what William James calls ‘the passion for parsimony, for economy of means in thought’, the Anthropocene cleaves to the ‘passion for simplification’ that the principle of identity requires. This is matched only by a philosophical impetus of equal value, which James calls ‘the passion for distinguishing’: that is, ‘the impulse to be *acquainted* with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole.’³⁰

Fundamentally, the identity principle ensures intelligibility because it is tautologous. Tautology, because it is self-referential, *self-same*, ensures intelligibility: ‘automatically,

²³ Aristotle, ‘Metaphysics’, in McKeon, R (ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 1072b, p. 880.

²⁴ Aristotle, ‘On Interpretation’, *Basic Works*, p. 46.

²⁵ Quoted in Woznicki, A. N. *Being and Order: The Metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas in Historical Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 126.

²⁶ Bacon, F. *Bacon’s Advancement of Learning and The New Atlantis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), p. 32.

²⁷ Locke, J. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), p. 286.

²⁸ Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 90.

²⁹ Davies, M. L. ‘Cognitive inadequacy: history and the technocratic management of an artificial world’, in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2016), p. 337.

³⁰ James, W. ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’, in *Selected Papers on Philosophy* (London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1917), p. 126-27.

it ensures *a priori* that the ideal is adequate to reality, the abstract to the material, the theoretical to the practical – that transcendental order encapsulates behavioural heterogeneity.’ It derives, Davies notes, ‘from the Greek: *autos* = self, my self, oneself. Hence, *to auto* = ‘the same’; *tauto-logos* = ‘the same word’’.³¹ For Barthes, ‘tautology is this verbal device which consists in defining like by like... Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world’.³² ‘Tautologies’, Steiner further observes, ‘can be thought of as strictly formal, as mirror images whose function is one of self-referential definition.’³³ For example, Theresa May resorted to tautology when insisting, redundantly, that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ after Britain’s decision to leave the European Union.

Additionally, too, orientation in the world depends upon identity as a managerial strategy, enabling us to recognise and affirm we are who we say we are (e.g. by *measuring* ourselves against the proportions of others). Strategically, identitary propositions and categorisations hence display a human species need to affirm our own existence, to *weigh* its nature. They further serve to manage that existence, functioning to confirm who or what or when we are, and how and why we came to be the way we are. Necessarily, this managerialism of an identitary variety is temporal: it derives from temporality as a fact of existence, hence from the need to organise time itself, since time-management coordinates life-time – the time of one’s existence – and hence puts it to use. To make things, ideas, and people equivalent, to apportion meaning, to coordinate existence, depends on this self-referential style of thinking. One can be easily matched or assigned, for example, to the historical period or time to which one ‘belongs’. As Aldous Huxley puts it, ‘the human mind has an invincible tendency to reduce the diverse

³¹ Davies, M. L. ‘The Proper Study of Mankind: Enlightenment and Tautology’, in *Thinking About the Enlightenment: Modernity and its Ramifications*, ed. Davies, M. L. (New York & London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 230-31.

³² Barthes, R. *Mythologies*, translated by Lavers, A. (London: Vintage Books, 2009), pp. 180-81.

³³ Steiner, G. ‘The Great Tautology’, in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 351.

to the identical. That which is given us, immediately, by our senses, is multitudinous and diverse. Our intellect, which hungers and thirsts after explanation, attempts to reduce this diversity to identity.’³⁴

Identitary propositions hence offer an illimitable capacity to discern or declare *likenesses* between things: to make them the same, to make them identical. Crucially, they display a human species need to couch ourselves in terms we can comprehend, to compose a world we can understand. For example, eschatological or teleological or secular narratives employing identitary propositions (i.e. placing the individual within an explanatory scheme that evinces either a specific or general purpose in its unfolding, or provide the identitary terms in and through which one’s life can be explained) offer insurance (in the form of human meaning) against the fluctuations of temporal contingency. In showing, often in detail, what one’s life ought to look like in matters ranging from the ordinary (everyday aspirations relating to employment or relationships) to the transcendent (life’s alleged origin, goal, or purpose as a whole, and of which one is part), these incubate the human mind against an otherwise epistemically mystifying and existentially inhospitable world. So, guaranteeing the existence of intelligibility and meaning in human affairs, identitary propositions lead, theoretically, to orientation in the world insofar as they appear to disclose the *propriety* of one’s place within it. They are cognitive tools against which one’s meaning can be measured. You ‘are’ what identitary proposition X (e.g. the Anthropocene) says you are to the degree that the proposition implies something not only about the nature of your existence, but also, perhaps, the duties of care towards oneself and others one ought in principle to uphold. These duties of identity, as I might call them, are provisional upon a further ‘fleshing out’ or

³⁴ Huxley, A. ‘The Nature of Explanation’, in *Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), p. 12.

interpretation of precisely those duties implied by one's existence *within* the comprehensive existential structure or situation the identity proposition *a priori* presumes.

Identity: a strategy of administrative comprehension

As established earlier, human beings are ecologically and epistemically embedded in the world of which they are part. This renders them existentially vulnerable – not least to the unexpected ramifications of their own knowledge, to the instrumentalisation of their surrounding environment by technical know-how (i.e. the implementation of procedural steps to achieve a desired outcome). For instance, certain forms of knowledge already pose an existential risk to human life, such as knowing how to build and detonate a nuclear bomb, how to extract and burn fossil fuels on an enormous scale, or how to recombine and concentrate chemical elements to produce concoctions lethal to water supplies and soil quality. Inadvertently, and usually unintentionally, the application of knowledge sometimes results in consequences unanticipated and undesirable.

For example, as Dryzek and Pickering point out in *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, our now antiquated Holocene institutions (which entail the performance, by definition, of institutionalised, habitual behaviours) exhibit the kind of 'strong continuity' typical of 'pathological path dependency.' This means that, over time, earlier 'decisions and outcomes constrain later ones', as evinced in the design features of transport infrastructure that yields patterns of behaviour based upon automobile dependency. Hence, sustained by the recurrent, repetitive behaviours which stabilise – at least in terms of achievable and expected outcomes – human existence in late capitalist market societies, path dependency entrenches established institutions to the exclusion of other, potentially more efficient and less harmful alternatives. It ensures patterns of thinking

and behaviour become inflexible for lack of alternative pathways. Indeed, fledgling alternatives are often deliberately obstructed by interests vested in the maintenance of the dominant pathway, whether in institutions relating to agriculture, energy, or global finance. As a result of the behavioural ‘lock-in’ to ‘unsustainable practices’ in these and other fields of human activity, themselves resulting from the type of infrastructure in which a society chooses to invest, and the ideas on which it decides to base its self-reproduction, social behaviour is subsequently locked into destructive patterns that systemically erode, ironically, the integrity of the very institutions designed to maintain human existence.³⁵ No wonder the technical knowledge on which our pathological techniques of human maintenance depend is unsuited to the contemporary ecological challenges posed by the very existence of these techniques.

Consequently, due to this continual reconstitution of life by knowledge (often to its detriment as well as to its advantage) human beings must encounter and survive a world of formidable complexity; that has a latent and ominous potential to continually exceed their understanding, and hence to require understanding beyond their immediate capacity to acquire. Indeed, increasingly concentrated in vast metropolises vulnerable to any breakdown in food or energy production, they must negotiate and manage a world of ecologically questionable design, the background conditions for which are being systematically eroded. For instance, as a further example of path-dependency, any wholesale disruption to the supply of petroleum would be catastrophic: we cannot currently feed the world’s growing population without sufficient petroleum, which is needed for nitrogen-based fertilisers on which most agricultural production depends to deliver the required yields. Yet clearly the supply of petroleum is finite – it is not a

³⁵ Dryzek, J. S. & Pickering, J. *The Politics of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 27 & 155.

sustainable source of energy, hence the system that relies upon it cannot be sustainable either.

However, expressed and facilitated through the symbolic system, the enhanced cognitive, linguistic capacities humans possess – as indicated earlier – enable the implementation of *administrative strategies* to manage the world (at least potentially if not always actually) in their own interests. That world, the world anthropogenically engineered, is itself fabricated at the behest of signs and symbols. Administrative strategies hence work symbolically, conceptually, with words of order or command: i.e. with categorisations, classifications, codifications. These evince an organisational, managerial intention. Administrative strategies may well be abstract, ideational, but the behaviours they facilitate, justify, and promote are not.

Administration itself derives from the need for comprehension, for understanding. What one is looking for is a semblance of rationality, for a point of clarity in the epistemic gloom. Thus as an enduring cognitive ideal, comprehension is described by John Henry Newman as the ‘enlargement’ of the mind; involving, he says, the ability to view ‘many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence.’³⁶ In this sense, comprehension is *administrative*, and administration is (ideally) *comprehensive*, insofar as it rests upon a technical, managerial mode of cognition. Traditionally, as Newman exemplifies, this managerial mode seeks to discover in reality a comprehensive order able to explain its phenomena. But actually such an order – e.g. an onto-theological order of the kind Newman has in mind – must be invested in that reality to explain and make it meaningful. Ideally, it thus cognitively compensates for the otherwise incomprehensible variety of phenomena in existence.

³⁶ Newman, J. H. *The Idea of a University* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1873), pp. 136-37.

For the environment the mind would otherwise encounter in itself contains no inherent, let alone satisfactorily meaningful, symmetry or arrangement. Rather, as William James argues, to make it make sense a symbolic order of comprehension must be constructed at the expense of an extensive ‘collateral contemporaneity’ it cannot actually accommodate.³⁷ That’s because ‘the human mind’, he explains, ‘is essentially partial. It can be efficient at all only by *picking out* what to attend to, and ignoring everything else, - by narrowing its point of view.’³⁸ Condillac likewise affirms this necessity, remarking that ‘since our mind is too limited to reflect simultaneously on all the modifications that can belong to it, it is obliged to distinguish them in order to grasp them successively.’³⁹ Hence the heterogeneous data of immediate experience is parcelled into regulatory concepts. These thus deliver meaning reliably manufactured. Ideally, comprehension would hence ensure that the human mind can make both itself and the world intelligible; that the mind, because it has already invested a symbolic order into it, might discern some sense in its own existence. In this sense, symbolic order ensures comprehension.

Further, the intolerability of chaos, of non-sense, means that comprehension is born of a desire not just to *generate* meaning (semantics), but to *capture* meaning in time. This involves isolating and selecting out variables (events, objects, elements, and the like) and ignoring others to suit the partiality of the human mind and its subjective interests. It means categorising and classifying these selected variables and postulating relations of compatibility and equivalence between them. To clarify, then, what is taken as authoritative for human meaning and compelling for human behaviour depends upon a

³⁷ James, W. ‘Reflex Action and Theism’, in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1923), p. 119.

³⁸ James, ‘Great Men and their Environment’, in *The Will to Believe*, p. 219.

³⁹ Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, translated & edited by Aarsleff, H. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 170.

symbolic system that invests order into the world: that *coordinates* the disparity of its phenomena. This cognitive intention constructs logical relations – bonds of identity, causality, and sufficient reason – between its otherwise incomprehensible, constantly fluctuating components. The world is reconstituted through a pre-selected symbolic infrastructure that comes to be viewed as altogether real and necessary, and which functions to conceal its actual disorder. Familiarity with that infrastructure enables the mind to impute to the mere fact of its existence a meaning. That meaning is conveyed through confabulated stories identifying what it means to exist through explanatory narrative structures conjoining whatever happens into a coherent plot or causal pattern of sequential events.

The Anthropocene: a comprehensive administrative categorisation

The creation of instituting society ... is each time a common world – *kosmos koinos*: the positing of individuals, of their types, relations and activities; but also the positing of things, their types, relations and signification – all of which are caught up each time in receptacles and frames of reference instituted as common, *which make them exist together*. This institution is the institution of a world in the sense that it can and must *enclose everything*, that, through and in it, everything must in principle, be sayable and representable and that everything must be totally caught up in the network of significations, everything must have meaning. The manner in which everything, each time, has meaning, and the meaning it has is rooted in the core of the imaginary significations of the society considered [my emphasis].

Cornelius Castoriadis⁴⁰

Ideas and conceptualisations – indeed, signifying, administrative strategies in general – don't simply function to symbolise and describe what exists to suit the mind's variant

⁴⁰ Castoriadis, C. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Blamey, K. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987), pp. 370-71.

purposes, but to pre-empt the significance of what exists, even reconstituting, eventually, the nature of existence itself. In being employed to comprehend them, they alter the things they are meant to comprehend. As an ‘imaginary signification’ (as Castoriadis puts it), or what I would call a *pre-emptive administrative categorisation*, the Anthropocene signifies the existential enclosure of human beings in their anthropogenic world; a precinct engineered to grant them their every desire (and as it turns out, uncomfortably more besides). A new world-historical situation emerges.

Evidently, the term is indiscriminate (i.e. it encapsulates everything) and as a consequence indeterminate (its meaning is unclear - not least due to the parlous state of its object, the planet). But what also generates interest in it, and what makes it particularly stand out in contrast to the preceding epoch of the Holocene, is the human species agent that orientates and grounds it. Its object or referent is nothing less than the ontological field of existence, the planet as a whole. It aims to conceptualise a new global condition: the world-historical emergence of a human system of reality, a world terraformed through techno-scientific instrumentation. It posits the consolidation of the human species as a supreme geo-physical force, altering planetary existence at every conceivable level.

Moreover, as an ‘epoch’, a comprehensive structure of coherence, the Anthropocene displays an administrative, *managerial* manoeuvre. Hence to posit the Anthropocene is to invoke both an *image* and an *account* of history: of a time falling out of existence, moving into the past, replaced by another. It lends itself to a ‘technical-bureaucratic’ perspective on our historical situation, on the world human historical action has inadvertently produced.⁴¹ In filing the world under a comprehensive category, ‘the human’, it constitutes a type of historical self-diagnosis. As Sloterdijk points out:

⁴¹ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 140.

When geologists use the term ‘Anthropocene,’ they adopt the nineteenth-century epistemological habitus of historicizing any arbitrary object and of classifying all historicized fields into eons, ages, and epochs. The triumph of historicism was fuelled in particular by the idea of evolution, which could be attributed to every realm of reality – from minerals to those large assembled bodies we call human ‘societies’.⁴²

At first glance, then, this Human Age would appear the final synchronisation of mind and world; confirmation at last of an inextricable bond between thought and being. This convergence of history and identity on such a vast scale would suggest the culmination of that grand project, as Bacon described it, to enlarge ‘the bounds of human empire’.⁴³ That humanist project now brought, ostensibly, to fruition, aimed at the administration of all things, actualised through the establishment of a global techno-sphere devoted to the advancement of human existence. This techno-sphere, or ‘human empire’, constitutes the technologically modified world, built to effectuate ‘all things possible’.⁴⁴

In the Anthropocene, then, humanity technically facilitates its conclusive means of self-encounter and self-validation: a world completely mapped, appropriated, and colonised. It becomes a comprehensive reflection of itself. This necessitates the human species’ technological fusion with the planet, turning it into our extended phenotype. Hannah Arendt describes this fusion, whereby we ‘have taken nature into the world as such and obliterated the defensive boundaries between natural elements and the human artifice by which all previous civilizations were hedged in’.⁴⁵ So although deposed by Copernicus from the centre of the universe – contra Ptolemaic, geocentric cosmology – and relieved of the idea that we constitute the favoured creation of God by Darwinian

⁴² Sloterdijk, P. ‘The Anthropocene: A Process-State at the Edge of Geohistory?’, translated by Springer, A-S., in Davis, H. & Turpin, E. (eds.) *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), p. 329.

⁴³ Bacon, F. *Bacon’s Advancement of Learning and The New Atlantis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), p. 265.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Arendt, ‘The Concept of History’, p. 60.

evolutionary theory, we again find ourselves re-centred on the planet as its most exclusive lifeform: effecting the most extensive alterations to it of any species in existence, and imposing our own version of intelligent design to which all things must cleave. Forthwith, one might presume a relation of conformity between mind and world, language and object, action and meaning.

In this regard, filing the world under a comprehensive category, the Anthropocene elides the category of nature itself, rendering obsolete the traditional bifurcation of nature and human culture, or blind matter and purposeful mind. It postulates the supersession of nature that occurs upon the invasion of human culture into it. To be sure, this utter separation remains imaginary. But is it any less conceited today to completely re-conceptualise existence in human terms? If nature and culture are no longer ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ (to re-appropriate a remark Stephen J. Gould once made concerning the domains of science and religion), not even co-existent with each other, then they are rendered *one and the same thing*. Hence in the Anthropocene the human species appears to surmount the limitations formerly imposed by nature through its transformative effects on planetary existence: from the physical, to the chemical, to the biological. It encroaches upon and alters biogeochemical systems to an extent hitherto unobserved in other species.

But this move exhibits not only the redundancy of nature, since it has been absorbed by the human artifice, but the redundancy of the human as a category as well, since being human was that quality formerly defined *against* nature and its objects. Nature was that predictable, expendable background against which what was human could be distinguished. Humans were special precisely because the mutability of their cognition, especially when working in technological co-operation with each other, could exceed or bypass both physiological and environmental constraints – what for other species

remained ineliminable obstacles. Now, on the contrary, if everything is anthropogenically colonised, if the ontology of the inhabited world draws its existence from the mind of man, the human has nothing against which it can distinguish itself, or anything in relation to which it could assert its own difference. Disturbingly, in the category of the Anthropocene it's all the *same, human thing*.

This tautological identification of nature and culture in the vocabulary of the Anthropocene derives from the form of the concept itself. Invoking its logical conclusion, an article in *New Scientist* claims that, 'as we stride on through the Anthropocene, our default view *has to be* that the manufactured world is *indistinguishable* from the natural world. *All* corners of the planet are *under* human management – *all* that changes is the direction and efficacy of that management' (my emphasis).⁴⁶ The grammatical coercion is explicit. It implies that in the Anthropocene, there is nothing so different to the human mind that it cannot be subsumed by it or rendered a part of its world. Surely this echoes the tautological conception of human knowledge Socrates attributes to Protagoras, where "man is the measure of all things – of the things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not."⁴⁷ It verges towards solipsism. So to say that everything and everyone is part of the Anthropocene is tautological inasmuch as the Anthropocene ensures *a priori* that it couldn't be otherwise.

Between the known and unknowable: The spectral world of the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is a name authorised to signal what we call the 'world' insofar as it constitutes a claim to symbolic power and epistemological efficacy over it. It contributes

⁴⁶ Swain, F. 'London show confirms the natural world is dead. Good riddance.' *New Scientist*, February 1st 2017. Accessed February 23rd 2017. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23331110-900-london-show-confirms-the-natural-world-is-dead-good-riddance/>

⁴⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, translated by Waterfield, R. (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 30.

to the effort to turn ‘the absurdity of existence into representations with which man may live’, as Nietzsche memorably put it.⁴⁸ It therefore suggests a re-construction and re-ordering of our picture of this world. For example: ‘the Anthropocene is not merely descriptive; it is a *social imaginary* that has exceeded its *intended categorisation* and whose *parameters delimit* ways of thinking about the world well beyond the confines of geo-scientific debate’ (my emphasis).⁴⁹ Or, ‘[the] notion of the Anthropocene is increasingly used to capture the broad idea that the course of life on Earth has taken a radically new direction’.⁵⁰ In this excess, this surfeit of potential meaning, the imputed elasticity of the concept exemplifies the yearning for *comprehensive categorical understanding* in the face of contemporary political uncertainty and ecological derangement. Its increasing intellectual capital, its authoritative aura, naturally displays the social and political authority afforded its inventors by virtue of their social position. It affirms the ‘generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power’ that academics possess as derived from their privileged position inside the academic institution.⁵¹

There is a pretext: after all, as Nussbaum remarks, ‘all living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world *as* something.’⁵² Charged with producing knowledge about the world – to make it be seen ‘as something’ understandable – the social function of the academic necessitates the continual production, the constant accrual, of arguments, theses, descriptions, accounts, analyses, critiques, and rebuttals. In a situation of institutional competitiveness, in the injunction to constantly generate more cash, this

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), p. 23.

⁴⁹ Davis, H. & Turpin, E. ‘Art and Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction’, in Davis, H. & Turpin, E. (eds.) *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), p. 9.

⁵⁰ Semal, L. ‘Anthropocene, Catastrophism and Green Political Theory’, in Hamilton, C. *et al.* (eds.) *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 87.

⁵¹ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 136.

⁵² Nussbaum, M. ‘Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature’, in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 47.

commodified knowledge must unavoidably be seen as an ongoing *potential* tied to the cycle of production, consumption, and obsolescence, rather than as an already completed project. One couldn't in principle make any final claim to sufficient knowledge, otherwise the academic function would be rendered redundant. The logic of capital, after all, generates this pathological need for more since 'enough' is instrumentally untenable. It depends on the now unquestioned idea that more is always required, that more is always available, that more is always 'better'.

So the Anthropocene constitutes a picture of the world. More precisely, it is a picture of the world as a human spectacle: with the entire planet as a human stage. Indeed, 'the fundamental event of the modern age', Heidegger declares, 'is the conquest of the world as picture'.⁵³ Since the world can be taken to mean the totality of whatever exists, the Anthropocene, in capturing it in an indefinite length of geological time, is a picture of it. It is an idea which claims total purchase on the world; an idea aspiring to total command over it. James points out that 'ideas are complementary factors of reality', and so, 'being realities, are also independent variables, and, just as they follow other reality and fit it, so, in a measure, does other reality follow and fit them. When they add themselves to being, they partly redetermine the existent, so that reality as a whole appears incompletely definable unless ideas are also kept account of.'⁵⁴ In 'redetermining the existent' as simply component parts of its picture, the Anthropocene keeps account of – measures the significance of; renders subordinate – all ideas, objects, and events in relation to itself. It becomes the primary picture, the ground, on which our comprehension of the world is erected; the final comprehensive picture that brings all things into an accord within its framework. This world is hence rendered a *spectacular world*. Which

⁵³ Heidegger, M. 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by Lovitt, W. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 134.

⁵⁴ James, W. 'The Pragmatist Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders', in *William James: Selected Writings*, edited by Bird, G. H. (London: The Everyman Library, 1995), p. 78.

in a pejorative sense I intend to mean a world reduced to performance as part of the human drama; to an ecologically nonsensical display. On show, for compulsory participation in, is the incomprehensibility of its operating system (the myriad technologies of the human species) brought under the aegis of a historical category by definition contrary to emancipation. That is: a picture, an act, inherently inimical to the emancipation of humanity and hence the planet from its own entropic dynamics.

A world picture is a circular, self-referential conception, and never more so in the guise of the Anthropocene. It's nothing but affirmative; articulating the predominant mode of experience for most human inhabitants, who encounter only the fabrications of human labour. For the word 'Anthropocene' itself is, as established, structurally tautologous: the epoch of the Anthropocene, or the world caught within the epoch of the Anthropocene, is nothing but the human world taken as an ontological (pictorial) whole. Fundamentally, planet and world are rendered identical: *the same*. At a stroke, this identity proposition takes conceptual and existential precedence by virtue of its planetary scale, its universality. It further appears to offer a comprehensive perspective upon human existence on behalf of its human inhabitants; even though this perspective, if endorsed, cannot be expressed except from within the Anthropocene. As viewed, necessarily, from within human existence as it provisionally exists, the Anthropocene would if universally endorsed hypothetically offer the *same* perspective on existence to every human and non-human observer. As viewed from within it, the planet must necessarily look like the Anthropocene, and the Anthropocene must look like the planet: no other perspective would be available, least of all one that could stand outside of it.

The placing of reality, or of all the objects of this entire planet into this new category, seeks to satisfy a desire for the most economical means of its description, its representation, its arrangement, its management. In describing, in the most

comprehensive way, ‘everything’ hitherto produced out of human action, including all those unintentional, unknowable consequences thereby, the Anthropocene conceptually ‘captures’ the reality – past, present, and future – it claims to stand in for. From the only point of view truly available – that is, the human point of view – nothing categorised as human or non-human can evade it; which to say, we cannot even evade ourselves. Henceforward, what happens on the planet by definition happens in the Anthropocene; so the planet can only be seen as confirmation of the Anthropocene since the meaning or significance of the planet has itself been reconstituted by its new categorisation as ‘in’ the Anthropocene. It hence provides a promontory over reality; the regnant means of access to it. The most complete observation possible, the Anthropocene is projected to endure beyond the temporality of any observer currently alive in it. Given that it is open-ended, as claimed, it cannot be known when this perspective would become invalid. For this reason, it is difficult to say whether it will endure, even if geologically sanctioned. Perhaps the very conditions that made it conceptually possible are already disintegrating, although certain human residues will persist into geological time. Perhaps it will become the dominant, default mode of self-comprehension for a fractured, radically unequal humanity. The adhesive that puts together and reconstitutes a coherent ‘world’ that is grounded upon a universalising category: a category that because it excludes nothing, includes everything. According to such a view, the world is in, or at least captured or contained by, the Anthropocene; and the Anthropocene reconstitutes what the world (read: humanity) is, what it is like, what it can be, because it conceptually contains it. To use a phrase from Debord, it hence projects and locks the planet into ‘an unreal unity’.⁵⁵

Unreal, because there can be observed a certain unreality about this world. It has more than a touch of the spectre about it; a ghostly insubstantiality. Ephemeral ‘events’,

⁵⁵ Debord, G. *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Knabb, K. (Sussex: Soul Bay Press, 2009), p. 54.

‘occurrences’, ‘happenings’ – terms used to try and successively demarcate change – slip increasingly out of its grasp, out of its control, out of its capacity to identify them. But paradoxically, this itself implies that the human world excels all too well at *producing* reality; at making more and more happen. Therefore, it sets up a demand for more and more knowledge about what happens that can never be satisfied, since it always comes afterwards. For the slippery terrain of this world must, if it is not to dethrone the alleged ability of the human mind to comprehend it (let alone itself), come to be known: somehow, anyhow. This situation, and the intellectual imperative of knowledge to comprehend what happens, indicates why managerial conceptualisations of time such as the ‘Anthropocene’ and ‘Capitalocene’ particularly resonate.

In the vocabulary of the latter, the manifest image of the ‘world’ is reduced to the consumptive, acquisitive logic inherent to capital. This logic demands a requisite ecological sacrifice from the earth that supports it and cognitive obedience from the humans forced to fulfil it. This means that it functions as a logic that must be fulfilled so that the disorder of things as they are experienced might have a sense. There appears no way out. The sense of captivity it produces is nicely expressed by Wittgenstein: ‘A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably’.⁵⁶ To put it another way, so insidiously fused is global capitalism with our sense of the world that it ensures that the only way things make ‘sense’ is if they (and we) function according to its logic – are made part of its spectacle.

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⁵⁶ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Hacker, P. M. S. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), S115.

As indicated earlier, to orientate itself the human mind requires a world it can comprehend. But to ensure the world is comprehensible means manufacturing a world made in its own image. Only then, in theory, can reality evince a comprehensive historical order comprehensible to the human mind. Because the human world is manufactured and maintained through the technological infrastructure, the life-support installations, now essential to human existence, the entities and events that derive from it can seemingly be classified, systematically arranged, and managed for human convenience. Further, as discussed, administration involves the application of technical procedures designed to comprehend this human world-project.

History is the management technology designed to implement such procedures. It attracts because it provides a stock of administrative strategies (categorical coordinators) that calculate, *identify*, the significance of *any* human being or human action. This technology is now set a new task: to grasp the historical significance of the human world as an ontological whole, in its entirety. Through the Anthropocene it hence appears to attain a new level of comprehension: after all, in identitary terms what category could be more historically comprehensive than the human? In temporal terms, what could be more comprehensive than the geohistorical? If humanity now intrudes into and shapes, forthwith, the history of the planet, then all history becomes human history at the very point at which non-human histories seemed to take precedence.

Here I demonstrate the reliance of the Anthropocene upon history as a *technology*, the all-purpose technology of the already historicized world. The Anthropocene, in turn, amplifies historicization by affirming the very technology – history (i.e. an administrative strategy for managing reality that aims to compensate for the inadequacy of human cognition and the anxiety inherent in its existence) – that supposedly makes it, and hence makes us, make sense.

History: the measure of humanity

Each new historical era mirrors itself in the picture and active mythology of its past or of a past borrowed from other cultures. It tests its sense of identity, of regress or new achievement, against that past.

George Steiner⁵⁷

If man is the measure of reality, what measures man? Against what does man measure himself? In this regard, historical knowledge conventionally undergirds, and purports to guarantee, human comprehension, human identity. So, whether alleging the utility of history's 'lessons', its salience as a purveyor of contemporary understanding, or simply its expedience for affirming one's identity (hence to know who history says one is), knowing something about history is rarely framed as less than an existential imperative. That's because in existential terms it operates as a sense-dispenser: it tells you how everything got to be the way it is. As such, history must, and without fail, be acknowledged: this is the cardinal rule in a world where history operates as the very measure of human reality, as its most pervasive, persuasive idea.

History, which has as its subject humanity itself, early on acquired its connotation with storytelling, with narration, particularly of human events and the causes and consequences thereof. Herodotus begins his *Histories* with the hope that in recording the deeds of man for posterity, their efforts will not perish in the fullness of time; that some measure of earthly immortality will accrue to them through words and memory. Cicero points out that formerly, 'history was nothing else but a compilation of annals; and accordingly, for the sake of preserving the memory of public events, the pontifex

⁵⁷ Steiner, G. *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 13.

maximus used to commit to writing the occurrences of every year... This mode of writing many have adopted, and, without any ornaments of style, have left behind them simple chronicles of times, persons, places, and events.’⁵⁸ The Greek term for history, *istoria*, means an enquiry: an enquiry into what happened in the past. Historicism later pushed this sense of ‘enquiry’ much further. This term sometimes refers to the existence of an inevitable, relentless, and universal historical process that links all of history together, assuming that ‘the general bestows meaning and significance on the particular’.⁵⁹ Historicists may claim, for instance, to have discovered ‘the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history’ as a coherent whole.⁶⁰ In short, history is not only explicable, but its destiny may also be manifest as part of what explains it.

So, for Fichte, history proceeds according to an intricate ‘plan’, it follows an immutable *plot*:

The life of the Human Race does not depend upon blind chance; nor is it, as is often superficially pretended, everywhere alike, so that it has always been as it is now and will always so remain; but it proceeds and moves onward according to a settled plan which *must* necessarily be fulfilled, and therefore *shall* certainly be fulfilled. This plan is – that the Race shall in this Life *and with Freedom* mould and cultivate itself into a pure and express Image of Reason.⁶¹

Implausibly, Fichte also claims *a priori* knowledge of the five stages that are to be surmounted on the way to fulfilling this plan, so certain is he of its success. Here an irresistible historicist dynamic is disclosed through human historical action, usually unbeknownst to its individual agents. For this plan is evidently superior to the human

⁵⁸ Cicero, *De Oratore*, translated by Watson, J. S. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860), p. 96.

⁵⁹ Arendt, H. ‘The Concept of History’, in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 64.

⁶⁰ Popper, K. *The Poverty of Historicism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

⁶¹ Fichte, J. G. ‘The Characteristics of the Present Age’, translated by Smith, W., in *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (London: Trubner & Co., 1889), p. 16.

subject and is one to which the subject must in perpetuity defer. The ideologies and systems of thought which die out along the way, and the billions who believe in them, are little more than historical residue: regrettable yet ultimately irrelevant detritus; the inevitable casualties of a larger scheme. They are summarily expelled from history's march towards absolution.

Historicism in its strongest form is hence a reformulation of the *a priori* purpose of human history in monotheistic, messianic theology, wherein whatever exists is meaningful insofar as God, as the first and final cause, makes both the existence and meaning of history possible. Much like its eschatological predecessor, the teleological model projects a sequence in which human lives pass in and out of existence as parts in a comprehensive plan, of which history is the great author. History is a systematic sequence of events culminating in a predetermined end. By contrast, consider the individualistic emphasis of Miguel De Unamuno's existentialism: 'History, the process of culture, finds its perfection and complete effectivity only in the individual; the end of History and Humanity is man, each man, each individual ... The individual is the end of the Universe'.⁶²

The explicit inevitability of Hegel's historicism, its belief in a whole, a totality, is anathema to this vision. In his *Philosophy of History* he posits the dialectical nature of his Universal History, through which the Idea of Freedom is eventually realised: 'Universal History exhibits the *gradation* in the development of that principle whose substantial *purport* is the consciousness of Freedom'.⁶³ Kant's projection, as outlined in his 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', asserts that mankind will obtain civilisational harmony thanks to a progressive rationale in history itself. His

⁶² Unamuno, M. *Tragic Sense of Life*, translated by Flicht, J. E. C. (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), p. 312.

⁶³ Hegel, G. W. F. *The Philosophy of History*, translated by Sibree, J. (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 56.

premise is made clear from the outset: ‘since he [the philosopher] cannot assume that mankind follows any rational *purpose of its own* in its collective actions, [it] is for him to attempt to discover *a purpose in nature* behind this senseless course of human events’.⁶⁴

Thus historicism as an intellectual stance is notable, *inter alia*, for its tendency to consider history as a holistic process governed, perhaps, by some abstract yet immutable law. It connotes a world-historical process marked by *continuity*, *connection*, and exponential *progression*, usually towards some form of human perfection; a veritable heaven on earth, as Marx envisions. Theoretically, in human history (i.e. in what human beings have done) one can observe the self-development of the human mind, and of the human species as a whole, towards freedom (Hegel); towards the realisation of a cosmopolitan plan of nature (Kant); or, enabled by intractable historical forces, towards socio-political emancipation, the liberation of the proletariat from the bonds of economic subservience (Marx). Such are examples of positive universal history. From the seventeenth century onwards history begins to denote, then, not merely the descriptive sequestration of past events into a chronicle or narrative, but a rational system or scheme detectable by human reason – detectable *because* of its rationality. The teleological systematisation of history gives the impression of incremental improvement, the gradual surmounting of delimited historical stages leading to an eventual end, whether it be freedom, rationality, enlightenment, or higher forms of civilisation. In history can be observed, and from observation of its events extrapolated, the fraught and painful deliverance of the human species from moral impoverishment and material squalor; the technological evasion of disease and drudgery; the rejection of superstition, intolerance,

⁶⁴ Kant, I. ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, translated by Nisbet, H. B., in Reiss, H. S. (ed.) *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 42.

and irrationality. One approaches by degrees a better, more reasonable world built on the intellectual and material labour of humankind.

Naturally enough, the stages or steps outlined may instead mark a progressive decline in the fortunes of the human species, depending on the author's sensibilities and prognostications. Each of Hesiod's five stages of humanity, for example, corresponds to metals of lesser or greater esteem and ease of manipulation. Wistfully he recounts the former Golden Age of peace and tranquillity, when human beings 'lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil', and noble of disposition; and the Silver Age populated by humans of lesser nobility, susceptible to the pain of aging and inhabiting an earth less benign; and who, insufficiently worshipful, are soon disposed of by Zeus ('he put them away'). He creates instead 'a new generation of mortal men', who due to their hardness of heart and the armour that clad them, inhabited an Age of Bronze. Loving 'deeds of violence', 'these were destroyed by their own hands' and fell to 'the dank house' of Hades. Zeus tries again, bettering his former creation by far, yielding a 'god-like race' of heroes whose deeds define this Heroic Age until their eventual passing. Hesiod then laments his own, comparatively compromised position in the Age of Iron: 'would that I were not among the men of the fifth generation, but either had died before or been born afterwards. For now truly is a race of iron, and men never rest from labour and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night... Strength will be right and reverence will cease to be; and the wicked will hurt the worthy man, speaking false words against him'.⁶⁵

Similarly, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* sets forth three principle ages, the first of which is, of course, 'Golden', characterised by unadulterated bliss, when the earth 'of herself gave

⁶⁵ Hesiod, 'The Ages of Man' in *Works and Days*, translated by Evelyn-White, H. (online). Accessed July 4th 2018. <http://www.theoi.com/Text/HesiodWorksDays.html>

all things needful', and spring was happily everlasting. The second, Silver Age is an age of lesser plenitude, when the seasons come into existence, demanding its human inhabitants build new shelters against the freezing winter, and develop the means of tilling the earth for food to store in times of need. The last age is that of Iron, whereupon 'straightway all evil burst forth into this age of baser vein: modesty and truth and faith fled the earth, and in their place came tricks and plots and snares, violence and cursed love of gain'. Seizing trees from the mountainsides to fashion crafts to bear them thence, humans set sail on unknown seas, greedy in search of new lands in every direction,

and the ground, which had hitherto been a common possession like the sunlight and the air, the careful surveyor now marked out with long-drawn boundary-line. Not only did men demand of the bounteous fields the crops and sustenance they owed, but they delved as well into the very bowels of the earth; and the wealth which the creator had hidden away and buried deep amidst the very Stygian shades, was brought to light, wealth that pricks men on to crime.⁶⁶

The wars fought for the sake of vast fortunes and the concomitant power over others it brings soon follow. Ovid's vision of a world thoroughly colonised, with every element of value parcelled out and sold, and subject to the consequences of its own greed, is a theme all too familiar today.

In the early twentieth century, too, Oswald Spengler presented a highly popular 'morphology of world history' in his *The Decline of the West*, charting its degenerate slippage into 'Faustian' culture and its 'downfall' (*der Untergang*).⁶⁷ 'Time triumphs over Space, and it is Time whose inexorable movement embeds the ephemeral incident of the Culture, on this planet, in the incident of Man – a form wherein the incident life

⁶⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses in Two Volumes, Volume I*, translated by Miller, F. J. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1921), pp. 9-13.

⁶⁷ Spengler, O. A. G. *The Decline of the West*, translated by Atkinson, C. F. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 5.

flows on for a time, while behind it all the streaming horizons of geological and stellar histories pile up in the light-world of our eyes.’⁶⁸

Evidently, imputing to history a processual plot, story, or scheme satisfies the implacable desire for an identifiable sense in what human beings do. Any sense at all would be preferable to the alternative scenario: e.g. that ‘the history of civilized humanity is a meaningless succession of events.’⁶⁹ Consequently, grand, systematic histories with teleological visions are seductive insofar as they appear to confirm the meaning and purpose of human existence. To submit to such a vision is to believe that our actions are not in vain. Hence to declare that history has an identifiable meaning, to claim that one knows what history is for, is to believe, in an obvious sense, that history does *have* the meaning ascribed to it; that the human mind can *comprehend* that meaning; and hence that a comprehensive *account* of history’s meaning is possible. The problem, of course, is that history is vast, contradictory, and potentially illimitable – i.e. it keeps happening. On the other hand, so much history happens that its very heterogeneity allows it to mean whatever one wants it to mean; to provide whatever sense one wants it to provide.

For example, one could claim (and this is a popular manoeuvre) to detect in history the hand of providence: a guiding power who ordains what happens such that whatever happens must make sense, even if the sense it makes may be mainly inaccessible to human beings. The attraction is evident. If an omnipotent creator is presumed (particularly in the theistic sense of an intervening, caring creator, the author of a moral universe with obligations brought to bear on human beings), there presumably must be some point or meaning to your having been created. At the very least, your existential situation is already ordained. In Acts 17:26 it is declared that ‘from one man he made all

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 507.

⁶⁹ Whitehead, A. N. *Adventures of Ideas* (London: Pelican Books, 1942), p. 231.

the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he *marked out their appointed times in history* and the boundaries of their lands’ (my emphasis). Likewise, verse 28 assures the faithful that ‘in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’⁷⁰ So, alluring metaphysical, messianic systems of earthly transcendence assert that the meaning of history – that is, of human action – has been realised in the glorious redemption of the world from sin, and of the soul from the menace of death. The incarnation redeems the spiritual estrangement of humanity and offers salvation from this vale of tears, from eternal separation from God.

Here, the most important historical event, the fulcrum on which history pivots, has already occurred. Therefore, the Christian eschatology has in theory a realisable pay-off as foretold in the book of Revelation: after the final judgement, the promise of everlasting life for the righteous few. Human history hence concludes, being but the tiniest fold in the endless fabric of eternity. Human beings are guaranteed deliverance provided they make the right propitiations to a jealous yet – they are assured – benevolent deity. Therefore, as Schlegel puts it, the task of the Christian life must be to approach as nearly as possible that God whose image man reflects: ‘man’s history must be the history of the restoration of the likeness to God, or of the progress towards that restoration’.⁷¹ God, then, provides the measure of human existence, hence the measure of human history: history only makes sense insofar as God underpins the purpose and meaning of human action. Human existence is intelligible only in relation to divine will. Indeed, Bossuet’s *Universal History* in the end affirms to the Dauphin:

that that long concatenation of particular causes, which make and unmake empires, depends upon the secret orders of divine providence... let us talk no more of chance, or of

⁷⁰ Acts 17:26-28, New International Version. Bible Gateway Webpage. Accessed November 9th 2017. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+17:26-28>

⁷¹ Schlegel, F. *The Philosophy of History in a Course of Lectures*, translated by Robertson, J. B. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852), p. 209.

fortune, or talk of them only as of a name with which we cover our own ignorance. What is chance in regard to our uncertain counsels, is a concerted design in a higher counsel, that is, in that eternal counsel which contains all causes and effects in the same order. In this manner every thing concurs to the same end; and it is for want of understanding the whole, that we find chance or irregularity in particular emergencies.⁷²

Here divine providence alone makes human history intelligible:

This is why the idea of Providence is at the same time the law of history. If the crash of empires "falling one upon another" does not in truth express some purpose of God regarding humanity, then history, or what is called by that name, is indeed no longer anything but a chaotic chronology, the meaning of which we should strive in vain to disentangle. In that case, Fortune, or rather Chance, would be the mistress of human affairs; the existence of humanity would be only a bad dream, or phantasmagoria, whose changing face would be inadequate to mask a void of nothingness. We should be fretting ourselves in that void without reason and almost without cause, our very actions would be but phantoms, and the only result of so many efforts accumulated through so many thousands of years would be the conviction, every day more clear, of their uselessness... Let us frankly own, then, that unless something Divine circulates in history, there is no history... The hypothesis of Providence is the condition or the possibility of history, as the hypothesis of the stability of the laws of nature is the condition of the possibility of science.⁷³

I shall not comment further on this except to note that the mere idea of providence does not itself suffice to dispel doubts about the competence of the plan or the validity of the purpose for the sake of which human history is supposedly enacted, regardless of its divinity. Blind faith in the good will of that divinity only perpetually postpones the question of how or whether this 'chaotic chronology', this growing accumulation of events in history afflicted by an apparent lack of relation one with another, will ever be made sense of in divine terms. If the kingdom of God so long promised never arrives, there will continue to be no transcendent means of telling to what degree one's actions

⁷² Bossuet, J-B. *A Universal History from the Beginning of the World to the Empire of Charlemagne*, translated by Mr Ephilstone (New York: Robert Moore, 1821), pp. 403-4.

⁷³ 'Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet', Catholic Encyclopedia Online. Accessed July 4th 2018.
<https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=2065>

make sense. Blind belief that they do, as has been seen throughout history, has enabled the most appalling crimes imaginable, leading one to conclude that the God who would will or direct such actions must be the author of a plan so monstrous, and of a nature so heinous, that the assurance that one's actions contribute to it would be far less bearable than the alternative 'void of nothingness' into which all action inevitably falls. In all likelihood, only human terms will ever be available to describe the necessarily downsized, limited, and contingent meaning of human actions in miniature, and much of that meaning will necessarily be divorced from the meaning of other actions undertaken with entirely different purposes in mind, and with equally unanticipated effects. What will continue to elude us is the ability, though probably overrated, to conceptualise the complete sense of human history as a 'coherent' whole.

Clearly, the arrival of the kingdom of God seems perpetually postponed. But another way to think about history, apart from the providential model of theodicy sketched above, is as evincing a secular course in its manifold events: some trend or trajectory towards a worldly destination, a heaven realised on earth. In other words, mightn't history, that seemingly incalculable potage of human actions, contain a hidden purpose of its own? Is there a pattern of historical development inherent in human action? That is, 'is there a logic of history?', Spengler wonders, 'a series of stages which must be traversed, and traversed moreover in an ordered and obligatory sequence?'⁷⁴ Certainly, it seemed improbable to philosophers in the wake of the scientific breakthroughs of the seventeenth century and beyond that the natural world should possess an inherent structure – a structure which natural philosophy was in the process of disclosing to the human mind – while humanity was left to founder in various states of disorder. This discrepancy, they surmised, might be overcome if one could discern, as in nature, a structure in history

⁷⁴ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, p. 3.

itself. History, they posited, could be profitably understood through its linear, ascendant movement through superior levels of human existence, and certainly not as a contingent aggregate of events and actions without point or meaning.

One of the first attempts to conceptualise history in this way is seen in Vico's *New Science*, which identifies (or rather projects) three stages of world historical development: the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men, in which forms of government are created. The intention is to establish a structure to explain types of human belief and action particular to these stages. Each signifies a natural response and improvement in comparison to its precursor. This historicist impulse was taken a step further by Adam Smith, who posits a four-stage theory of human development, in which the history of man begins in the age of hunters, progresses to the age of shepherds, evolves into the age of agriculture, and culminates with the age of commerce. Upon which time, Smith says, 'society has done all in its power towards its ease and convenience'.⁷⁵ Yet while he suggests that man has reached that highest stage of development, others were less satisfied, and confidently, prophetically, expressed their belief in a better future.

Benjamin Franklin, for example, writing to Joseph Priestly, foresees a time when science will have overcome gravity and made more efficient the methods of agriculture.⁷⁶ Similarly optimistic, Condorcet expounds the view that practical advancements, as brought about by the scientific method, will not only bring about the end of disease, but also rehabilitate the moral conduct of humanity by perfecting the operation of the empirical world:

⁷⁵ Smith, A. 'The Four-Stage Theory of Development', in Kramnick, I. (ed.) *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 378-79.

⁷⁶ Franklin, B. 'Letter to Joseph Priestly', in Crocker, L. G. (ed.) *The Age Of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 294-95.

May it not be expected that the human race will be meliorated by new discoveries in the sciences and the arts ... by farther progress in the principles of conduct, and in moral practice; and lastly, by the real improvement of our faculties, moral, intellectual and physical, which may be the result either of the instruments which increase the power and direct the exercise of those facilities, or of the improvement of our natural organization itself?⁷⁷

Later, Droysen goes further, claiming that ‘History is the *γνώθι σαυτόν* [‘know thyself’] of Humanity’. Hence, ‘what their genus is to animals and plants ... History is to human beings’. The accumulation of history, of human action performed in the world, aids human understanding insofar as knowing what human beings have done is tantamount to knowing what human beings *are*: ‘History is humanity becoming and being conscious concerning itself’. Additionally, ‘the epochs of History’ he claims to discern are ‘stages’ in human self-knowledge:

According to the number of these traversed stages, grows the expression which man is able to form of the Supreme End, of his longing after it, and of the way to it. The fact that this expression broadens, enlarges and deepens itself with every stage, is the only thing which can wish to pass for the advancement of humanity. To the finite eye beginning and end are veiled, but the direction of the streaming movement it can by investigation detect. Condemned to the narrow limit of the here and now, it yet dimly espies the whence and wither. It sees what it sees by being filled with a light in which and from which everything is ... The direct glory of the light our eye could not bear, but practising, clarifying, and inflaming its vision in the illuminated spheres which do disclose themselves to it, it catches gleams of ever greater reaches, ever more comprehensive empyreans. Among the circles thus formed the human world with its history is one...

In sum, ‘History is Humanity’s knowledge of itself, its certainty about itself’.⁷⁸ As with Vico before him, the fact that human beings make history means that human beings can, with a certain amount of intellectual effort, come to know their own nature.

⁷⁷ Condorcet, ‘Sketch of a Historic Tableau of the Progress of the Human Mind’, *Age of Enlightenment*, pp. 305-6.

⁷⁸ Droysen, J. G. *Outline of the Principles of History*, translated by Andrews, E. B. (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1897), pp. 44, 48-49

Indeed, Vico's theory of knowledge holds that one can only know what one has created. The natural world, as distinct from the world of men, has clearly been created by God; and since only He can fully comprehend what He has made, only He can fully comprehend nature. But according to the same principle, human beings, having made their own history, and having fabricated their own world, have the capacity to know themselves likewise. '*The civil world is certainly the creation of humankind. And consequently, the principles of the civil world can and must be discovered within the modifications of the human mind.*'⁷⁹ Through acquaintance with human history, therefore, our nature is revealed. Whatever human beings are can be seen in what they have done, in what they have been.

In his *Construction of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Dilthey subscribes to an organic view of history as a flourishing plant. As such, he remarks that 'every action, every thought, every common activity, in short, every part of this historical whole, has its significance through its relationship to the whole of the epoch or Age'. The catch, unfortunately, is that 'one would have to wait for the end of history to have all the material necessary to determine its meaning'.⁸⁰ So, although one might be a drone used to satisfy its vast design, the ultimate meaning of that design must remain a mystery since you're unlikely to be there at its culmination. This organic view is likewise echoed by Ortega y Gasset, who declares that 'History is a system, the system of human experiences linked in a single, inexorable chain. Hence nothing can be truly clear in history until everything is clear'.⁸¹ Life is a great drama, but it is a drama which is conducted upon the stage of history, for there must, he assumes, be a dynamic which *makes sense* of it.

⁷⁹ Vico, G. *The New Science*, translated by Marsh, D. (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 119-20.

⁸⁰ Dilthey, W. 'Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies' in Rickman, H. P. (editor and translator), *W. Dilthey Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 198, 236.

⁸¹ Ortega y Gasset, J. *History as a System and Other Essays Toward a Philosophy of History*, translated by Weyl, H. (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), p. 221.

History, then, is life itself: it is the Aristotelian prime mover. The existential problem of finding a source of human self-understanding is hereby solved through the identitary synthesis of humanity and history, which are deemed entirely congruent, existentially compatible. History doesn't merely compliment human existence, it's necessary to its augmentation and self-comprehension.

Surely now, the uncertainty of existence can be alleviated by this realisation? Unfortunately, Ortega distorts his otherwise valid existential concern by rendering existence subordinate to history's superior dynamic. Since the individual cannot ever be rid of history, then this results not in the freedom to create an authentic existence, but to constantly carry around the burdens of the past, to identify oneself with them. In place of science and nature, which he repudiates, Ortega puts history: his faith in history's authority is therefore the same as the faith in science and reason he regards as invalid. History as an operating system for human existence is advanced through 'social faith' in its efficacy, for in its essence it doesn't require the adherence of any single individual: 'far from its effectiveness hinging on my recognition of it, it acts and functions independently of my adhesion'. One is a mere node in a network, an adjunct of history. Hence the conception of history found in Ortega portrays a vast, unstoppable force: we exist, and we create history. Nor can we do otherwise. Our task is to constantly keep making history as the only nature we have: '*Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is ... history*'. That is to say, echoing Droysen, that 'what nature is to things, history, *res gestae*, is to man'. Ortega therefore posits the growth of successive historical 'layers' provided through human action, to which the individual 'adds his own growth'. We keep adding to the total: 'He goes on accumulating being – the past; he goes on making for himself a being through his dialectical series of experiments'. Given these premises, he

ends up articulating the conclusion to which those premises necessarily lead: that ‘to comprehend anything human, be it personal or collective, one must tell its history’.⁸²

Expressed so clearly in Ortega, this is exactly the conclusion that prevails in contemporary society, in the historicized world at large. So certain does it seem, so irrefutable, that one resorts to it as though it were an unbending law of existence. Unthinkingly, automatically, ‘we shall have to say that the only element of being, of ‘nature,’ in man is what he has been’; thereby, ‘the past is man’s moment of identity’.⁸³ This conviction is the very fundament of the *historicized world*; it functions to maintain history as this world’s dominant technology; as a technical procedure performed to attribute meaning to what is meaningless, as described by Theodor Lessing in *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen (History as Giving Meaning to Meaninglessness)*. It supposes that history can make things make sense, which amounts effectively to saying that sense can be made of history: that human action evinces a sense in its historical performance.

The result is that today the intellectual deference paid to history, as a sort of existential tribunal to which one can appeal, is unlike any other technological prosthesis in the extent of its hold on human cognition. Human beings essentially *offload* the problem of sense and meaning onto history. It offers a conduit for the mass of human experience and action that has now gone and projects it into the present lifeworld in order to affirm and sustain the way things are.

But a flaw immediately presents itself. The defining feature of the past, after all, is that it’s past: that what happened, by necessity, *already* happened; that what used to exist, existed *before*, in the past. To get around this – to access what happened in the past,

⁸² Ibid., pp. 214, 176, 217, 214-16.

⁸³ Ortega, *History as a System*, p. 213.

therefore to discover the meaning the past is supposed to have for the present – a technical solution was engineered: namely in the form of a certified simulation of that past constructed by academic technicians or information managers. This simulation would ensure that the present could be made sense of, henceforth to make history, historical knowledge, the measure of humanity. An entire industry had to be erected, a disciplinary infrastructure established, to manufacture for the present adequate explanations for how it came to be the way it is; to produce for it adequate quantities of historical meaning. Hence the human mind now depends upon historical knowledge: the most comprehensive *technology* for managing existence ever devised.

History: an administrative, managerial technology

As mentioned previously, in its simplest sense a history means an enquiry: an enquiry into what happened in the past. Today the word tends to denote the written results (historiography) of this enquiry: i.e. organised accounts, orderly explanations of past events as a special form of knowledge that takes the past as its object of study. The formation of history as an academic discipline makes it the result of *systematic*, professionally sanctioned enquiry that aims to produce a coherent body of knowledge; knowledge tested against established standards of practice pertaining to the use and interpretation of evidence. Properly speaking, a simple distinction should be drawn between the past (what happened) and history (knowledge of what happened). The two are usually conflated since the word history is frequently used indiscriminately to denote both ‘what happened’ (i.e. the general ‘course’ or accretion of events) and ‘knowledge of what happened’. This category mistake is routinely committed. Yet history is certainly not – cannot be – the past: it is a colossal, symbolic simulation that aims to stand in for it, comprising billions of words given both physical and digital form. Necessarily it falls

short since the past as it was the way it was, as it was in and for itself, is irretrievable. Although the world is littered with decaying relics indicative of its former existence, the past itself doesn't exist. Indeed, the past was only ever partially accessible to those who experienced it as their present.

Hence history, as knowledge of what happened, is simply a substitution for what happened: for what used to exist. Correspondence to what used to exist is precisely what is not available to the historian, in the sense of this constituting the lived experience of *placement* within that past *present*. Only this experience could resemble something we could call its immanent, synchronic, and contingent truth. For the present is 'something that comes from itself'; it 'has a past, but in the form of remembrance. It has a history, but it is not history'.⁸⁴ The entire corpus of historical knowledge exists, then, only as an 'imaginary object' made possible by 'an extensive abstraction from the present prehension of the historical material currently available'.⁸⁵

Although an important criterion of truth in realism, one cannot make sense of the notion of correspondence outside of our system of linguistic signs since the past to which the historian tries to 'correspond' is 'thinkable and knowable only through the current semiotic or symbolic system'. The past, without being first conceptualised in a series of symbols comprehensible in ordinary language, would not permit of representation at all. Nor could it be recognised if it were not first mediated through the same language we currently operate with. So, 'historical knowledge... stands in symbolically for everything that once was ... What is conventionally received as 'naturally objective', is a symbolic projection, a virtual image, generated by disciplinary practice and social thought habits'. Therefore, the truth about the past cannot be something which is transmitted through to

⁸⁴ Levinas, E. *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 52-3.

⁸⁵ Davies, *Imprisoned by History*, p. 35.

the present except on the terms of reference already ascribed to it. Hence without the symbolic system which allows for description, there could not be anything for the historical text to refer to in the first place, let alone an ‘extra-textual referent’ which ‘makes’ the text true.⁸⁶ Since primary sources are simply ‘swatches’ of reality which must be pre-invested with symbolic meaning to become identifiable at all, their reality, their truth, comes down to them being purely symbolic of the reality within which they previously existed. They don’t constitute direct apprehensions of the past, but rather a ‘microcosmic *version*’ of it.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, historical knowledge still seems to offer that most reassuring of prospects: that a comprehensive order, a reassuring sense, can be – has been – identified in the most disparate human actions, perhaps even in the totality of human history. The injunction to think historically, to conceptualise the world in historical terms, makes this impression difficult to forego. How otherwise to interpret the detailed explanations historians produce? How do they manage it?

Actually, history is simply a technology for *putting* things in order, for *managing* human existence. After all, ‘historical discourse can do no more than signify the real’, obtaining its self-referential truth via coherence and through ‘careful attention to narration’.⁸⁸ Technically, regardless of what happens, it hence has the capacity to tabulate whatever was, whatever is, and whatever will be. If technology is principally a means of compensation, of organisation, of manipulation, of management, then history proves the most dominant technology ever devised. By design, nothing can nor will elude it. Through it, no object, no person, no event ever remains inexplicable. For it is the pre-

⁸⁶ Davies, M. L. *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006) pp. 235, 234.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

⁸⁸ Barthes, R. ‘The Discourse of History’, in Jenkins, K (ed.) *The Postmodern History Reader* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 121-23.

eminent means of making the world make sense: the world has, after all, already been historically categorised. Thus, it can make anything mean anything, no matter what actions occur, no matter how much life alters. Precisely because the complexity of the world created by the mind has surpassed the mind's cognitive capacity for comprehension, history functions as an all-purpose filler to satisfy every conceivable interest and intention – malign or otherwise.

The historian function, in short, implements 'rhetorical strategies of incarceration' that shackle ordinary existence within historical schemes of sufficient reason.⁸⁹ This 'carceral mentality' thus pre-empts both present and future, deploying a range of discursive devices to ensure existential capture, to manufacture cognitive consent. Historians compile instruments of comprehension which enlarge history's dominion. These thence ensure everything can be historically arranged; that the future can be pre-empted; that historical meaning can be assumed from the outset and more cobbled together where necessary. Examples include: 'structures of coherence' (*age; century; epoch; era; period*); 'dynamic forces' (*course; development; evolution; (historical) forces; process; stream (of history)*); 'stabilizing components' (*(historical) context; continuity; custom; framework; origins; place (firm, proper, or common); precedent; product; roots; tradition (invariably long)*); as well as synchronising past and present through order words such as *'beneficiary; heritage; identity; legacy; precursor'*.⁹⁰

Essentially, the historian schematically configures, *emplots*, the mass of historical occurrences through a certain provision of meaning. That is, through 'ordering them chronologically, defining them contextually, connecting them causally, categorizing them thematically, classifying them conceptually'.⁹¹ They produce coordinating schemes

⁸⁹ Davies, *Imprisoned by History*, p. 46.

⁹⁰ Davies, M. L. *How History Works: On the Reconstitution of a Human Science* (New York & London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 93-94.

⁹¹ Davies, *Imprisoned by History*, p. 133.

of categorical reference, ensuring that nothing can be considered except in accordance with the interior sense, the historical reason, such schemes provide. For ‘we may meaningfully speak of the truth of a sentence only within the terms of some theory or conceptual scheme’.⁹² Historians, as technicians, produce ‘administrative categorizations’ designed to arrange whatever happens in terms of what already happened.⁹³ Hence they rely upon the identity principle: e.g. declaring that what happened *then* bears a *likeness* to what happens *now*, and vice versa. The technology of history particularly depends upon the construction of *coordinating categories* so that the object of study can be ensconced within delimited temporal parameters, such as the ‘Roaring Twenties’ or ‘*La Belle Époque*’.

Such conceptual instruments function to indicate the ‘coherence of historical time’, signalling the intelligibility of the historical events assigned to them.⁹⁴ As such, historical knowledge, the work of its functionaries (i.e. the historians who generate and apply its administrative solvents), amounts to a comprehensive effort to supply sense to the world by fabricating the means of making it coherent. To this end,

[The historian-function] thus constructs familiar types of comprehensive parameters, such as ‘periods’, ‘contexts’, ‘frameworks’, or ‘identities’. It ensures the rational consequentiality of its accounts by means of a narratological infrastructure of reassuring sameness projected by categorical coordinators such as ‘forces’, ‘origins’, ‘processes’, ‘traditions’, and ‘turning-points’.⁹⁵

The result, Davies argues, is that:

The world cannot be recognized except in historical terms, in the terms provided by categorical coordinators that preconceive the world as a historical arrangement, as already historicized... For the individual, at the moment of apprehending the world, history always

⁹² Quine, W. V. O. *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960), p. 75.

⁹³ Davies, ‘Cognitive inadequacy’, p. 348.

⁹⁴ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 93.

⁹⁵ Davies, ‘Cognitive inadequacy’, p. 346.

intervenes, history always takes precedence. Resorting by default to categorical coordinators, ordinary language, everyday experience, automatically construes itself in historicized terms.⁹⁶

History is therefore the dominant means of dispensing explanations for whatever happens. Historical categorisations, narratives, and identities intercede as palliatives to the chaos of the world and the indifference of the cosmos, giving us a place of significance, constructing an artificial order in existence. Indeed, in conventional thinking, the very ‘fabric’ of existence is historical, because it was fabricated by human historical action. Comprehending it hence requires vast quantities of historical knowledge. Once attained, history can thus produce not just a ‘sense of “reality”’ which is “more comprehensible” than one’s present social existence’, but a ‘sense of the ‘real’ that can be used as a criterion for determining what shall count as realistic in [one’s] own present’.⁹⁷

Theoretically, historical knowledge would thus function as a map with which a route through reality can be plotted: plotted up to, and hopefully beyond, the present moment. It functions to make the world intelligible. A powerful logic enforces deference to its injunctions. The conclusion almost universally reached – that history takes precedence – is premised on the assumption that to comprehend anything, one must comprehend its history (as explained earlier). That is, one must comprehend its history because its history tells you how it came to be the way it is. Likewise, the way it is, is how history made it the way it is. Hence thinking circles back to history in a perpetual loop. One cannot escape the conclusion thus entailed: that our intelligibility, the substance of our situation in the world, must be found in, or derived from, history. After all, thanks to the

⁹⁶ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 92.

⁹⁷ Davies, *Historics*, p. 11.

coordinating categories already projected upon the past, it already ‘knows’ how what happened, happened.

In other words, since history is the primary technology for making sense of what happens, it follows that the mind, as part of history, is predisposed to think of itself in historical terms. This fact explains the persistent engagement in social practices and behaviours that affirm history’s quasi-metaphysical role. To wit: the constant historical analogies; the endless sites of ‘historical memory’; the reams of historical fiction; the parade of historical dramas on television and film; the interminable commemorations, re-enactments, and ceremonies; the insuperable desire, in particular, for historical identity. The mind endlessly seeks historical validation, confirmation, justification, and history never fails to oblige – after all, that’s what it’s designed to do, to make sense no matter what. Indeed, ‘categorical coordinators result from an ingrained reflex of comprehension, symptomatic of the psychopathology of historicized life, to guarantee existential self-assurance by means of its comprehensive historicization’.⁹⁸ Evidently, for these strategies of self-comprehension to work, the historicized mind, the mind that construes itself as an instalment of history, as always already explained by history, must be made susceptible to these categories through their inculcation in ordinary experience. It must be induced to believe that its self-understanding naturally depends upon them. To this end, the proliferation of history in wider society, the daily encounter with it, the constant use of language that contains within it the means of establishing its pre-eminence, efficiently prepares thinking to consider it natural as well as indispensable.

Clearly, this entire situation is generated in part by the technicalities of historical scholarship. It points to how effective the self-delusions generated by disciplinarity and specialisation can be, working through the ‘technical formalism’ of academic research.

⁹⁸ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 95.

It suggests the inherent inadequacy of human cognition, hence motivating its desire for ‘a redemptive significance in human behaviour’.⁹⁹ History would thus constitute the human requiem to loss; our bastion against the void of non-sense. Hence the premise that ‘the discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience’.¹⁰⁰ This, at least, is what the principles of identity, causality, and sufficient reason essential to the structure of historical comprehension would imply. These metaphysical principles would make history meaningful, capable of synthesising ‘the heterogeneous data of human existence’ into an orderly ‘*process that shapes individual and collective life, that makes a person, a society, a nation* ““what it is”’.¹⁰¹

Of course, reality isn’t inscribed with meaning *a priori*: the mind invests it with what Whitehead calls ‘psychic additions’ that give the impression of pre-discursive arrangement. Once installed, these raise the possibility of comprehension. Through the plots, stories, schemes, and narratives it generates, consciousness contrives to fabricate a world that makes sense. Therefore, history’s coordinating categories effectively conceal ‘the void at the heart of historical comprehension’.¹⁰² So to insist that history’s administrations don’t work would raise understandable suspicion, even hostility. The historicizing reflex kicks in because knowledge comes too late – we want a pre-emptive fix on the future. The mind would in any case prefer a semblance of sense to no sense at all. It would seek to relieve or even forego the apprehensions its immediate impressions induce for the sake of an intelligible simulation.

⁹⁹ Davies, *Historics*, p. 236.

¹⁰⁰ Chakrabarty, D. ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2009), p. 197.

¹⁰¹ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 89.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Generating some semblance of sense requires conceptual abstraction: i.e. specialists ‘pursue their self-defined aims in their own, methodologically hygienic world, on principle shunning any intellectual confrontation with the very premises which constitute them as disciplines’.¹⁰³ Locke similarly describes the narrow specialist, whose provincial training foments intellectual blindness. Specialisation, and the deference to authority and convention it requires, produces creatures of habit, essentially predictable and of limited intellectual tastes. They ‘converse but with one sort of men, they read but one sort of books, they will not come in the hearing but of one sort of notions’. These bookish adepts ‘canton out to themselves a little Goshen in the intellectual world... They have a pretty traffick with known correspondents in some little creek; within that they confine themselves, and are dexterous managers enough of the wares and products of that corner with which they content themselves’.¹⁰⁴ Usually this results in ‘scholastic epistemocentrism’, as Pierre Bourdieu calls it; i.e. ‘imputing to its object what belongs in fact to the way of looking at it’.¹⁰⁵ Disciplines are, after all, nothing if not self-referential. So, concerned above all with the question of *what* it is – which conveniently positions history as a ‘natural’ phenomenon which everyone needs – historians hence neglect to consider what history *does* in and to our everyday life; to examine what thinking historically has actually, historically *produced*.

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To recapitulate: the elaboration of historical explanations, as evinced through the proficiency of the academic industry designed to construct them, gives the impression

¹⁰³ Davies, *Thinking Practice*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ Locke, J. *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881), p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 53.

that whatever happens really can be made sense of: that historical explanations are adequate to the reality they are meant to explain. The human mind desires ways of ensuring its meaning through the establishment of a 'place' for itself by reference to the coordinating categorisations of history. History is put first, takes precedence, precisely because it concerns what already happened. Because it seems to comprehend everything, because nothing seems to evade it, it dominates contemporary culture. The more history seems to explain, the more incontrovertible it appears; the more incontrovertible it appears, the more it seems to explain. In allowing nothing to escape historical administration, no strategy appears surer of its own success. But it results, ironically, in the incomprehensibility of the *historicized world*.

The prison-house of history: the historicized world

The historicized world should not be confused with historicism, particularly in the latter's sense of an unfolding teleological system which inheres in history, but is to be taken to refer to the world as it actually exists, as 'already *shaped* by history'; shaped, in particular, by historical knowledge that constantly informs and motivates historical action.¹⁰⁶ Hence to live a historicized life is to be ceaselessly forced to confront capitalism's latest thing before bidding farewell to it, like so much historical junk. Yet in this world – a world where 'instinctively, automatically, thought concedes cognitive priority to history' – human inhabitants are still infused with historical knowledge, freighted with a confused, ineradicable consciousness of history.¹⁰⁷ This consciousness, informed by the realisation that 'things are not the way they used to be', defers to the

¹⁰⁶ Davies, M. L. 'Cognitive Inadequacy: history and the technocratic management of the historicized world', in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2016), p. 337.

¹⁰⁷ Davies, *How History Works*, pp. 22-23, 20.

way things were to explain the way they are.¹⁰⁸ The historicized world hence operates with, and is dependent upon, history as its primary technology. It's this technology that ensures it keeps historicizing itself.

The historicized world involves several other dimensions. First, it denotes a world that constantly supersedes, surpasses, history itself – it's a world continually disconnected from how it used to be, hence a world where history cannot operate any longer as a *model* for human existence. This means that history, what happened, 'no longer functions as precedent, likeness, or sameness'; 'it no longer offers lessons for what is happening now or for what might happen in time to come'.¹⁰⁹ It is a world where history takes precedence yet whose precedents have lost explanatory force. However, second, this realisation is itself suppressed: the human mind still accounts for itself in historical terms, in terms of how the world used, historically, to be. Historical knowledge with its precedents ensures that more and more of the past infiltrates the present, and able thereby to set the parameters of present possibility. So, third, it's a world in which – contrary to common belief – historical knowledge itself becomes illusory; redundant as a method of making sense of things due to its perpetual supersession by historical action. Ultimately, as Davies explains:

The more historical knowledge is invested in the world, the more a historicizing production system [capitalism] creates revolutionary, latest things, the less the mind can **comprehend** a constantly self-historicizing situation it itself has brought about and anticipate its future ramifications. History as a comprehensive system for managing the world – as the total system of the totally administered world – still functions unsuspectingly, automatically, but its grasp on what is happening is ever weaker. In this sense too (i.e. through this self-encounter of the mind), history in a historicized world is redundant.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 163.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Nonetheless, having been inculcated to consider historical knowledge indispensable for its self-understanding, and being incessantly engaged in history-focused behaviour, the historicized mind falls back on history as it has been conditioned to do. It looks hopefully, expectantly, to progenitors and precedents supplied by historical knowledge for their explanatory power: for a comprehensive explication of its contemporary condition under the categories it provides. History consequently informs our understanding of identity, of who and what we are, by offering ‘substitute, synthetic identities to sustain the capitalist system of fabrication that erodes them’.¹¹¹ No wonder, Nietzsche observes, that ‘the past of every form and mode of life, and of cultures which were formerly closely contiguous and super-imposed on one another, flows forth into us ‘modern souls’; our instincts now run back in all directions, we ourselves are a kind of chaos...’¹¹²

However, historicizing has become so routine, so quotidian, that nobody gives it a second thought. Actually, this cognitive habit continually amplifies and re-enforces itself. The constant revival of history fuels the expectation for more elaborate resurrections. These consequently elicit belief in history’s explanatory power. The more history is the case, the more it appears unimpeachable. After all, don’t we measure our self-comprehension, our understanding, our sense of personal significance against history? To suspend belief in it would hence appear the height of absurdity: to do so would seem to confiscate our humanity, to withhold our very meaning. Well, that’s because the historicized mind is pre-programmed to default to history, to put history first. Compelled to haunt itself with this looming spectre, its central premise ‘has to start by presupposing its conclusion: that the past takes precedence’.¹¹³ Indeed, as Susan Sontag remarks,

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 89.

¹¹² Nietzsche, F. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by Zimmern, H. (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), p. 91.

¹¹³ Davies, *Imprisoned by History*, p. 49.

Ours is a time when every intellectual or artistic or moral event gets absorbed by a predatory embrace of consciousness: historicizing. Any statement or act can be assessed as a necessarily transient ‘development’ or, on a lower level, belittled as mere ‘fashion’... For over a century, this historicizing perspective has dominated our ability to *understand* anything at all. Perhaps once a marginal tic of consciousness, it’s now a gigantic, uncontrollable gesture.¹¹⁴

Since its inception, the elaboration and increasing sophistication of this gesture (e.g. as evinced in the efficacy of the professional discipline designed to refine it) has proved useful beyond imagination in ensuring that whatever happens has some sort of sense. Existence requires ways of ensuring its relevance through the establishment of a ‘place’ for itself by reference to the sequential ‘administrative categorizations’ and ‘strategies of comprehension’ that structure historicized life.¹¹⁵ For once the idea of history as a *process* is given priority, once it does its historicizing work, one cannot escape the conclusion thus entailed: that our very intelligibility, the substance of our entire situation in the world, must be left to history to fully discern given the existential precedence afforded it. Here and now, it cannot be for you or me to know what will be made of us in the future, in what ‘proper’ ‘context’ or ‘category’ we may yet be placed, to what ‘process’ we may yet be tethered. Rendered residual by default, the historicized mind contemplates its own redundancy; bound as it is to sink with hardly a trace within a whirling flux ‘of advent and supersession’. Hence historicization as a cognitive reflex enforces the eventual obsolescence of whatever happens, of whatever is: everything must anticipate the deadening surety of its disappearance. As Sontag goes on to say:

We *understand* something by locating it in a multi-determined temporal continuum. Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future ... Thus, a single work is eventually a contribution to a

¹¹⁴ Sontag, S. ‘Introduction’ in Cioran, E. M. *The Temptation to Exist*, translated by Howard, R. (London & New York: Quartet Books, 1987), p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Davies, *Cognitive Inadequacy*, p. 346.

body of work; the details of a life form part of a life-history; an individual life-history is unintelligible apart from social, economic, and cultural history; and the life of a society is the sum of 'preceding conditions'.¹¹⁶

And since there is no way of knowing what would count as a 'relevant' existence in an extra-human sense, we must resort to tautology or self-reference, whereby whatever makes for a relevant human existence is precisely what we (or rather, our history), as the only measure for what counts as relevant, claim it to be. As Cioran puts it, if one is to be tempted to exist this must become 'a matter of avoiding the contagion of nothingness', of non-meaning, that lingers outside our linguistic frames of reference.¹¹⁷

Subsequently, if the mind is already pre-disposed to the belief that it is only thus that its identity and meaning will become clear, what makes existence 'relevant', what ultimately determines whether it has meaning, depends on it being appropriately historicized. It must align itself with the precedents that precede it, identify with the historical categories that define it. What we call an existence, or individuated consciousness, is assigned to a temporal 'context' intended to lend it the reassurance that it has been adequately arranged: arranged in a secure, sequential order depending upon the administrative categorisations available. This historicizing reflex is far from being confined to professional historians in their academic work, but has come to constitute the primary way in which entire societies categorise themselves in their search for relevance, for identity.

Since this method is a mode of self-explanation for which the inhabitants of the historicized world seemingly must reach for their own contentment, they must further rely upon it for their temporal orientation insofar as they now see the world from *within* historical knowledge, from *within* historical categories. This is the quintessential

¹¹⁶ Sontag, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.

¹¹⁷ Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, p. 207.

knowledge of an already historicized existence: reliant upon history as its explanatory technique, the mind will assign priority to it as a matter of urgency because cognitive habit inclines it to do so. Whatever happens can be accounted for because an entire industry of categorical coordinators is dedicated to indexing and thereby allocating it some measure of historical meaning, establishing – as with everything else – its allotted ‘place’ in history. In ensuring comprehension through pre-emption, in allowing nothing to escape from its ‘predatory embrace of consciousness’, as Sontag calls it, no other activity appears to better vouchsafe (i.e. *bind together* through history’s identitary logic) human meaning.

Yet to historicize existence in this way, to maintain fidelity to this gesture without question, is to be easily lured into the already established, already triumphant schemes of historical self-comprehension that pervade the world. It is likely to make one receptive to categories that might yet be constructed: ones which might amount to an even more ‘comprehensive’ historicization of existence (e.g. the Anthropocene, in which metaphors of coercion like ‘bind’ can be readily deployed). Such categories exert themselves upon the mind with a force proportional to their apparent ineluctability, their capacity to appear as instantiations of a natural order inherent in historicized existence.

However, this broader claim – that the world is historicized – requires further substantiation. Everyday language abounds with tropes that serve to reinforce conventional patterns of thinking expressive of history’s suasion. They reflect intellectual habits largely unquestioned. The following example is unexceptional (a simple Google search of the phrase ‘history is all around us’ delivers an endless procession of articles referencing this banal fact of historicized existence) but illustrative of history’s indemnifying function. *The Times* front-page headline of March 29th 2017 eerily declares that ‘the eyes of history are watching’. Its accompanying photograph depicts Theresa

May signing the Article 50 letter confirming the intention of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union; supervised (the historical oversight is explicit) by a dour daub of Sir Robert Walpole casting what is described as ‘a stern gaze’ over proceedings. The Orwellian allusion to total, inescapable surveillance is disconcerting. A vague promise of vicarious historical redemption, or at least the promise of a future sentencing, hangs over the scene. Presumably, the overall effect is meant to illuminate the added weight and gravitas only history (as a substitute God) can bestow. Naturally it is nothing but acquiescent to the prevalent conception of history’s value. In it, one can see the lingering effects of the misty belief in a historical destiny driven forward by inexorable laws, even though in the last century Karl Popper showed that ‘there can be no scientific theory of historical development’ explaining the succession of worldly events.¹¹⁸ Any belief to the contrary was always otiose.

Yet even if belief in a specific historical outcome has faded, the endless use of and gratuitous fascination with history takes commercial and artistic form at every turn. Its exchange value is tremendous, as is its categorising utility. Who hasn’t visited a world heritage site, a shop selling reproductions of quaint historical objects, or purchased a ticket to view yet another historical drama unfold on the silver screen? Who didn’t see, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse, parades of academic historians identify the event with those which went before, offering historical antecedents to reassure the bewildered masses? Think, again, of the historical novel as a genre in literary fiction, the historical documentaries, the dedication to commemorative ceremonies, the reconstructions of historical events, the endless museums devoted to the preservation of historical artifacts. Notice, further, the production of vast quantities of historical knowledge underpinning virtually every academic discipline (in the humanities,

¹¹⁸ Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. xii-xiii.

intellectual efforts are in the main diverted to the study of the past) in the form of scholarly monographs, articles, and edited books; the pilgrimages to sites of ‘historical memory’; the proliferation of material and intellectual detritus to which is assigned historical significance; and the invidious and often lethal recourse to history to establish, coordinate, affirm, or deny various forms of identity. As seen lately in the clashes over historical monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia, or simply in the deadly conviction, evident in the views of Israeli fundamentalists, that they have the right to occupy the West Bank:

You are right about one thing. In sheer human terms, what we are doing to these Palestinian people is inhuman. However, if you think about it, you will see that it follows inevitably from the fact that God promised the whole land to the Jews, as the Bible tells us. So it’s not just that we don’t want these shepherds to be here on these lands. We don’t want them to be anywhere, on any lands. We want them not to be.¹¹⁹

Evidently, mandates for the most egregious crimes can be readily found everywhere in history, imagined or otherwise. No wonder Elias Canetti complains: ‘written history, with its impertinent manner of defending everything, makes the desperate situation of mankind even more desperate with all the lying records. Each man finds his weapons in this arsenal, it is open and inexhaustible. Using the rusty old plunder that lay there peacefully, men start hitting away at one another outside. Then the dead parties shake hands as a sign of reconciliation and go down in history.’¹²⁰

Further, historical knowledge is so ubiquitous, so banal, that everyone can claim to possess the barest modicum of it. This panoply of historical knowledge is assumed to have purchase on contemporary events, as the frequent drawing of historical analogies in the mass media demonstrates. The idolatry of the historicized world is revealed, too, in

¹¹⁹ Shulman, D. ‘Bulldozing the Peace Process in Israel’. *The New York Review of Books*, December 11th 2017. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/12/11/bulldozing-the-peace-process-in-israel/>

¹²⁰ Canetti, E. *The Human Province* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 24.

the rhetorical locutions so beloved by politicians: e.g. imputing the existence of a moral ‘arc’ to history; of being on the right ‘side’ of history; believing history will ‘judge’ or ‘condemn’ a particular course of action in the future; ‘vindicate’ a policy decision and hence absolve politicians of blame; or urging (their actions to the contrary) that the ‘lessons’ of history be learned – even though, as Paul Valéry once wittily remarked, history can teach nothing because it provides examples of everything. Moreover, history, as one soon learns, is something that can actively impede you (‘history is against them’), particularly when it comes to sporting events, or its precedents can somehow operate in your favour (‘history is on their side’).

Imputing to history intellectual and moral authority, these instances of ‘history-focused behaviour’ rest on a central presumption: that history has a capacity to inform immediate consciousness of its situation, of its *meaning*. History can be applied to anything, and it can show anything. What doesn’t, or couldn’t, or wouldn’t eventually have a history? What won’t, eventually, be rendered historical? Historical explanations, accounts, and narratives seek to incorporate every conceivable aspect of reality into a story of some kind; hence to ultimately relegate what happens to history. Already culturally and cognitively established are the conditions that would encourage its production: e.g. constant and unprecedented political and environmental change; the staggering volume of information which occludes understanding; the irreducible complexity of events happening all over the world and at a speed which defies comprehension. Since the human mind is sandwiched between a past it cannot retrieve and a future it cannot know, what, if not history, can make it all make sense? What, if not history, can accommodate and organise whatever happens in terms of what already happened? What else can plug the gaps between past, present, and future? The deference to history derives from a world already saturated in historical knowledge; already drilled

in historical propitiation; already conditioned to think in terms of historical precedents; already predisposed to look for reasons for the way things are in the way they were. History, constructed as knowledge of what happened, is evidently humankind's principle consolatory fiction. It compensates, allegedly, for the lack of any inherent sense or meaning in human affairs. Its cognitive persuasion seems universally vindicated.

There's no doubt, either, that history in its disciplinary form remains a well-staffed machine tended by an administrative clique devoted to its consecration. In short, historians operate a comprehensive technology for producing order, arrogating to themselves an illusory capacity to make things make sense; even though no one really knows how much sense makes sense, how much meaning something needs in order to be finally meaningful, or how many reasons one would need in order to have 'sufficient' reason. In the end, in the historicized world what something means comes down to what it means for history; the sense something has comes down to what sense history can give it. This summarises the current climate of historicization that grips consciousness. In its collective veneration, contained within the imperative to identify, to remember, to represent, to re-enact, in short to render unto it utter and increasing devotion, history is unmatched.

In a historicized world, then, history is far more than a purely academic, disciplinary force bestowing order on a vast number of past occurrences: it is invoked for its broader identitary function. That is, history will tell us who and what we are precisely because, as the structure of historical comprehension dictates, it always *already knows* the conditions which produced us. It explains how we came to be the way we are. Which actually means, in practice, that 'historical thought short-circuits present critical

knowledge by manifesting the present as incapable of being known or transformed without history'.¹²¹

This is revealed in the self-perpetuating logic of historical understanding. In its usual formulation, even as it orders and structures human life, this appears benign, obvious, natural. After all, the contours of my life, the thinking goes, are shaped according to historical contingencies. I am who I am because I am a 'product' of the past; those who inhabit the future will be a product of the present, as those who proceed from that future will derive from the past which preceded it. Hence my identity, my self-understanding, derives from history. I occupy a place in a system of identity conferral which tells me who I fundamentally am, because I know where I come from, what has produced me: 'the ideas of a culture, of a historic tradition, of an ongoing community, work through him. He is their agent, and cannot be their author, or even, perhaps, their critic'.¹²² Subsequently, I reproduce the forms of life of my society. I am an agent of sorts, but in a system of larger significance:

Our sense of both individual and collective identity is intrinsically rooted in a sense of where we have come from. The search for historical understanding ... is an intrinsic element of the condition of being human, in the same way as the physical functions of eating, sleeping, and reproducing.¹²³

Note the key phrase which affirms history as a reliable, true source of identity: 'intrinsically rooted' operates as a necessary condition and generates a false conceit, namely that 'since history has made the world we live in what it is, it must self-evidently be 'about us''.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Cohen, S. *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (California: University of California Press, 1988), p. 19.

¹²² Gellner, E. *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6.

¹²³ Fulbrook, M. *Historical Theory* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), p. 193.

¹²⁴ Davies, *Imprisoned by History*, p. 62.

In this view, history is equivalent in value to physiological necessities required to perpetuate our existence. Individual identity can certainly be said to be informed, of course, by a sense of our placement in relative terms to social factors which inform our existence as situated persons, but these are aleatory, contingent factors. Rather than the possibility of identity being a matter of volition or happenstance, the sense given by Fulbrook is of identity as something essentially historic; that the meaning we seek is nothing but, and could be nothing other than, historical. This assertion of an organic (i.e. 'natural' because historically derived) identity betrays an underlying presumption concerning the power of history to be able to explain, to justify, to provide meaning (and this is the crucial premise) to what it also *creates*. True, one must largely submit, if one would live, to one's physiological necessities, caught in a cycle of eating, sleeping, and so forth. But to align history as equivalent to these, to call historical understanding intrinsic to life, and to equate that understanding with a necessary condition for identity, is a falsehood not only in an epistemological sense but in an aesthetic one. Since primary knowledge and understanding of the world doesn't derive from history, does not, in fact, necessitate historical understanding, the logic collapses. The sense of identity history provides operates only as a secondary veneer of prescriptive meaning. The allusion by Fulbrook to its inescapability is meant to be suggestive of its indispensability. It is to say, in a circular fashion, that every identity derived from history is one which already knows and understands its place in the world because history explains why it is the way it is. This system is extraordinarily powerful; indeed, is formidably self-perpetuating. It is reinforced by the belief of academic historians that their subject is of primary importance in showing people what they are actually *like*, who they really are. History, the conclusion states, is our real reality, the source of our true, and therefore historical, identities. The sheer dominance of the conceptual apparatus history enforces can only be inevitable.

Little wonder then that historical forms of identity, to re-apply Nietzsche's words, 'after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people'.¹²⁵ He elsewhere remarks that man 'needs history as a storeroom of costumes. To be sure, he notices that none of the costumes fit him properly'. Hence, the using of every historical period, 'the sense and instinct for everything, the taste and tongue for everything', the artificiality and nostalgia of the continual recourse to history sequesters the mind, only able to 'nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures'.¹²⁶ Rather than being liberating, historical thinking, premised on the existential expedience of historical knowledge, entraps us in history itself.

Historical knowledge: an incarcerating industry

In his *De Oratore* Cicero expatiates on the necessity of historical knowledge to the orator, through whose voice its wisdom is conveyed: 'by what other voice, too, than that of the orator, is history, the evidence of time, the light of truth, the life of memory, the directress of life, the herald of antiquity, committed to immortality?'¹²⁷ The implication is that this 'directress of life' is indispensable to human understanding. Indeed, the chief use of history, David Hume specifies, is 'to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour'. For he points out that 'when we have lived any time, and have been accustomed to the uniformity of nature,

¹²⁵ Nietzsche, F. 'On Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense'

[http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.htm](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm)

¹²⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 91-92 & *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Fadiman, C. P. (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), p. 85.

¹²⁷ Cicero, *De Oratore*, p. 92.

we acquire a general habit, by which we always transfer the known to the unknown, and conceive the latter to resemble the former.’¹²⁸ Lord Bolingbroke likewise expresses, in common Enlightenment fashion, the belief that there exist:

Certain general principles, and rules of life and conduct, which always must be true, because they are conformable to the invariable nature of things. He who studies history as he would philosophy, will soon distinguish and collect them, and by doing so will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages... A man of parts may improve the study of history to its proper and principle use; he may sharpen the penetration, fix the attention of his mind, and strengthen his judgement; he may acquire the faculty and the habit of discerning quicker, and looking farther...

Bolingbroke echoes Cicero – *historia magistra vitae est*: ‘history is the ancient author: experience is the modern language... as experience is conversant about the present, and the present enables us to guess at the future; so history is conversant about the past, and by knowing the things that have been, we become better able to judge of the things that are’.¹²⁹ On this key presumption is based the belief in history’s unimpeachable precedence over human life: simply because it already happened. Hence historical action is always, in an already historicized world where things are constantly turned into history, and that everywhere pays homage to history, action historically informed. In fact, *historically* informed is usually interchangeable with *better* informed.

Although displayed in a wide variety of ways, cultural deference to history most conspicuously takes banal, commodified forms. For instance, prospective buyers surveying the recent Gasholders London flat re-development site are invited to literally ‘Own a Piece of History’, as the notice plastered on the outside of the building proclaims. Indeed, ‘refurbishing history’ portends a lucrative commercial opportunity. History can

¹²⁸ Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited and with an introduction by Steinberg, E., second edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 55 & 71.

¹²⁹ Bolingbroke, H. ‘The Utility of History’, in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, pp. 357-58.

be effectively used to turn a tidy profit. After all, as the online brochure confirms, with its undeniable ‘heritage’ King’s Cross is ‘inextricably linked to London’s industrial past,’ making all the more alluring this ‘splendid marriage of contemporary architecture and Victorian engineering’.¹³⁰ ‘Piece’, ‘linked’, and ‘marriage’ indicate (as mentioned previously) the historicized world’s conspicuous dependence upon the identity principle – a principle of absolute centrality in ensuring history is made to work: i.e. that its components are *interlinked* seamlessly and smoothly in the human interest, irrespective of whether what happens evinces any particular unity or sense in human affairs. Then there’s *Historical Trips* (by-line: ‘The History that Shaped Us’), a company which offers ‘expert-led historical journeys’ that ‘blow the dust off the pages of history; uncovering the extraordinary stories of people and events that have shaped our modern lives’. For example, the ‘Churchill and Champagne’ tour, at a mere £2,495, offers the chance to ‘trace iconic locations’ on ‘a channel-hopping exploration of wine, war, and the battle for Europe’. Or one might prefer ‘The Final Solution’ tour, an enticing eight-day journey ‘to the epicentre of the Second World War’ in Poland, where one can discover ‘some of the greatest acts of heroism and most heinous crimes the world has ever seen in cities, battlefields & deathcamps’.¹³¹

The more distant the historical phenomenon, the more ardent the efforts to retrieve it: witness the furore surrounding the discovery of an ancient skeleton in Leicester belonging to Richard III, made possible by the *Looking for Richard Project*. Naturally, this proved a golden opportunity for historical amplification: the burial site was subsequently granted ‘scheduled monument’ status, and a visitor centre (by-line: ‘Dynasty, Death and Discovery’; adult tickets £9.25) erected at a cost of £4 million. Here

¹³⁰ ‘Heritage: Refurbishing History’ & ‘Architecture’, Gasholders London Online Webpages. Accessed 30th April 2018. <https://gasholderslondon.co.uk/heritage>

¹³¹ As advertised on the back cover of *Private Eye*, No. 1469, May 2018. The reader is encouraged to visit their website at www.historicaltrips.com for more information.

visitors are invited to ‘immerse’ themselves in the ‘incredible story of the last English king to die in battle and the first to be DNA tested.’¹³² Not to mention the extraordinary spectacle of the remains being solemnly re-interred in Leicester Cathedral in a ceremony presided over by British royalty and Church of England luminaries, while – bizarrely – Benedict Cumberbatch, allegedly a distant cousin of the long-deceased king, recited a eulogy by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy: ‘My skull, scarred by a crown, emptied of history. Describe my soul as incense, votive, vanishing; your own the same. Grant me the carving of my name.’¹³³ Simply entitled ‘Richard’, the poem produces the requisite impression of familiarity with a person dead for over 500 years.

Certainly (as this episode demonstrates), the morbid infatuation with history, with long-lost remains hoisted out of obscurity, can be profitably exploited by consumer culture to produce unwavering sentimentalism: the purchase of historical facsimiles (‘the visitor centre stocks a range of Richard III-related gifts’), the participation in commemorative ceremonies (hundreds lined the streets of Leicester, and in York a ‘Solemn Choral Evensong’ at York Minster was followed by a procession of civic attendees and senior clergy), or attendance at exhibitions (‘Murder, Mystery and Mayhem’) help heighten the illusory sense of ‘identity’ between history and individual. But hawking history for ready cash or to fortify ideological prejudice symptomises a deeper need in human culture: the need for something to orientate human thought and action. Hence it is usually assumed that history can help show us how to live. Through moral injunctions, events of significance, examples of catastrophic political and social decision-making, this conviction reinforces the authority of history and justifies the need for constant historicization. In reality, it encourages the social diffusion of inherently

¹³² ‘Dynasty, Death and Discovery’, King Richard III Visitor Centre webpage. Accessed 10th July 2019. <https://kriii.com/about-the-centre/dynasty-death-and-discovery/>

¹³³ ‘Richard by Carol Ann Duffy’. *The Guardian*, 26th March 2015. Accessed 10th July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/26/richard-iii-by-carol-ann-duffy>

contradictory historical ‘precedents’ which oscillate between the irrelevant and the inflationary: i.e. inducing abstract ‘emotional charges’ which frequently result in lethal repercussions (one can use history to deny other people’s historical identity with impunity).¹³⁴

‘Historic’ – an attribute tellingly synonymous with ‘important’ – events are afforded credibility (invested with a sense of providence) precisely because they provide a means of explaining our present condition. Marwick invokes the trusty *argumentum ad populum* to insert a plug for his own discipline: ‘history is indeed a social necessity... people are fascinated by the past, understand its importance, and want reliable history, the kind that is produced by professional historians’. As such, and without compunction, he endorses an incarcerating conception of ‘the past which governs our lives in so many ways’, and whose influences ‘are more immediate, more all-pervasive... than the implications of the sciences’.¹³⁵ Setting history up unequivocally as a natural, indispensable need, Marwick presents the historian as the self-righteous facilitator of individual self-comprehension who cultivates a shared, historical sense in which all are bound to participate.

Devotion to history, to what precedes, may in such a way seem propitious to the greater good, to the very ideal of comprehension itself. And conventional thinking does consider historical comprehension essential to human comprehension. Thus nothing can be adequately known unless it is known historically. Nothing can be sufficiently understood unless it is historically understood. History, the thinking goes, serves to orientate human existence (i.e. providing a sense of identity, putting people in their proper historical ‘place’); to vouchsafe human value; to guarantee human meaning.

¹³⁴ Marwick, A. *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Palgrave, 2001), p. 248.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-69.

History is principally employed to satiate a need for comprehensive order in actuality always absent.

In fact, having been reliant on it for so long, it seems the only thing left to do is up the dosage: to aim for *more* comprehensive historicizations, *more* comprehensive historical narratives, categorisations, frameworks, and contexts (as the Anthropocene precisely demonstrates). Examples abound. Take, for instance, the quest for historical consilience through the old idea of a ‘Universal History’ – repackaged as ‘Big History’ – which takes the presumption that history ‘makes sense’ still further. The infatuation is confirmed through the genesis of the ‘Big History Project’, which grants access to a colossal 13.8 billion years of it. Backed by Bill Gates, and inspired by ‘total history’ proponent David Christian, it aims to ‘grasp history as a whole’. Forming a universal narrative composed of eight ‘thresholds’ extending from ‘The Big Bang’ to ‘The Modern Revolution’, it ‘examines our past, explains our present, and imagines our future. It’s a story about us’. Insidiously, automatically, everything is categorised as history: everything is affirmed as historical. Predictably enough, the question the project poses, as ever, is ‘what does 13.8 billion years of history tell us?’¹³⁶ Because if, as the historicized world supposes, everything really is historical, then the world requires more and more history to make sense of it. So, Macquarie University’s *Big History Institute* posits nothing less than a unified account or giant historical synthesis into which we would all be subsumed, predicated on the supposition that we ‘need to understand our place in a larger universe’.¹³⁷ Never mind that you or I might object to being ‘placed’ therein. Perish the thought that all this history has no real relevance, that it could be entirely incongruous with one’s personal existence.

¹³⁶ ‘Big History Project’. Home Webpage. Accessed 11th October 2017.

<https://www.bighistoryproject.com/home>

¹³⁷ ‘About Big History’. Macquarie University Webpage. Accessed 9th August 2017.

http://bighistoryinstitute.org/about_the_institute/about_big_history/

Not that anyone appears to mind the accompanying sense of vertigo. Books that offer to enlarge or improve upon our sense of historical comprehension do especially well on the market. There's the vast *Histoire mondiale de la France*, for instance, which recounts some 40,000 years of French history, and has sold more than 100,000 copies. Yuval Noah Harari's bestselling *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* presents 'history as the next stage in the continuum of physics to chemistry to biology'. More than a million people have purchased it, captivated by how history hangs together according to what Harari presumptuously calls 'the view-point of a cosmic spy satellite, which scans millennia rather than centuries'. From his omniscient, celestial vantage point, it apparently 'becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity', barring a few inconvenient 'speed bumps on history's highway'.¹³⁸ Apparently, we are to conclude that the massacre of European Jewry or the development of the atomic bomb were merely extemporaneous ruffles in history's fabric, quickly smoothed over with no obvious damage to the sense of the greater whole. In his recent *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Harari the satellite generously expands his orbit to show you the shape of the future (with persistent and necessary reference, naturally, to the past), prophesying a history driven forward by technological tinkerers in Silicon Valley. These historical administrations serve to magnify the morbid draught of history; concentrating the dosage to ensure universal coverage. Just in case anyone had hoped otherwise, they block any escape from the mandatory historical 'contexts' into which we are compulsorily ensnared.

So today, in a world continually separated from what and how it was, history is still construed as the last, best hope that sense can be made of it all. For historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage, for example, it's axiomatic that history takes precedence,

¹³⁸ Harari, Y. N. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), pp. 445 & 185.

indisputable that history works. They even diagnose, of all things, a *shortage* of history – a disturbing lack of historical subservience. In *The History Manifesto*, they welcome the return to fashion of the *longue durée* exemplified by the Anthropocene, ‘Big Data’, and the turn to ‘Big History’. Lamenting the decades of specialised research at a micro-historical scale (e.g. the social history of cheese; wearisome studies of English utensils), they contend that historians should once again – following the example of economists like Thomas Piketty and geologists like Paul Crutzen – generate the larger explanatory narratives our world so desperately needs. Naturally this involves ‘looking to the past to shape the future’. Indeed, ‘a spectre is haunting our time’, they complain; ‘the spectre of the short-term’. One can’t help but wonder what could be more ‘spectral’ than history itself, settling as it does like an occlusive fog over existence. Nevertheless, we are given to understand that in fact:

Specialists in sustainability have unknowingly become historians. The major abstract concerns of climate scientists and the policy specialists who responded to them were questions over periodisation, events, and causality; they were problems in the philosophy of history. We are in a world that more and more looks to history to make sense of the changing nature of world events.¹³⁹

The sentiment is familiar, but the expectation naïve, assuming as it does that there contains in history sense sufficient to disclose the ‘course’ of things to come, or the meaning of contemporary events. Lacking even a modicum of evidence, this proposition collapses into platitude. It smacks of desperation. Actually, world events enacting change at a speed and on a scale unprecedented elude historical comprehension, precisely because historical comprehension always has information insufficient to be truly comprehensive. Constantly overtaken by events, history (what happens) is being

¹³⁹ Guldi, J & Armitage, D. *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 124, 33.

historicized at a rate which exceeds the capacity of history (knowledge of what happens) to make it make sense.

Harari effectively admits this, noting that due to the changes wrought by ever increasing quantities of knowledge, which in turn prompt even greater levels of knowledge production to account for those changes, ‘we are less and less able to make sense of the present or forecast the future’.¹⁴⁰ Instead of assuming that more history can make sense of current events *per se*, he commits a different error. Acknowledging that history does not, as the old saying goes, enable us to avoid repeating past mistakes because ‘the present is just too different from the past’, he goes on to claim that ‘the study of history aims above all to make us aware of possibilities we don’t usually consider. Historians study the past not in order to repeat it, but in order to be liberated by it’: apparently, ‘this the best reason to learn history: not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies. Of course this is not total freedom – we cannot avoid being shaped by the past.’¹⁴¹ He further asserts that in fact, ‘studying history aims to loosen the grip of the past’ because although it ‘will not tell us what to choose’, it at least ‘gives us more options’.¹⁴² But this misleading proposition contradicts his earlier observation that ‘history shaped not only our technology, politics and society, but also our thoughts, fears and dreams’, an assertion at odds with the sophisticated idea that through studying history one could liberate oneself from it.¹⁴³

Actually, at any given moment our immediate reality only ever presents the options it has. The potential to amplify such options as may be available to human agents is not derived from knowing more about what now non-existent people did in a non-existent past under their own, now non-existent circumstances. Indeed, the presumption that more

¹⁴⁰ Harari, Y. N. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage Books, 2017), p. 67.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 68 & 74.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

historical knowledge could add to the number of choices immediately available is at odds with Harari's earlier claim that 'the more data we have and the better we understand history, the faster history alters its course, and the faster our knowledge becomes outdated'.¹⁴⁴ Unfortunately, that would include historical knowledge too. In practical terms, this means the more historical knowledge we have, increasingly obsolete as it is, renders the grasp we have on our historical situation more tenuous. The idea that historical knowledge renders one better able to enact change in the present is mistaken, because to exercise efficient causation in the present is a matter of responding to present conditions divorced from the past. The amount of options available aren't actually enhanced at any meaningful level of analysis. Moreover, this dodges the perturbing question of whether there is any real, tangible connection between human history and the human mind. As Gertrude Stein says, 'history has really no relation to the human mind at all, because history is the state of confusion between anybody doing anything and anything happening'.¹⁴⁵

Moreover, Harari's peculiar claim that becoming acquainted with history comes with the associated potential 'to free yourself from the past' contradicts what he himself seems to accept: that historical knowledge exercises a deep, and often deplorable, influence upon the human mind, a mind already long since historicized, accustomed to thinking historically, in historical terms. Indeed, 'the *historical sense*', Nietzsche says, is the capacity 'for divining quickly the order of rank of the valuations according to which a people, a community, or an individual has lived, the 'divining instinct''.¹⁴⁶ Conventionally, then, 'the world is sensed through history'; the sense for history 'reigns *without restraint*'; the morbidity of historical sentience obliges the subject to treat history

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 67.

¹⁴⁵ Stein, G. *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 141.

¹⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 91.

with the utmost reverence.¹⁴⁷ If the aim of historical study has been to loosen history's grip upon us, it has manifestly failed. Why would one expect otherwise, since history is a technology specifically designed to exert influence over how people comprehend the world around them – even to comprehend it for them? So the central question for Harari would be why, if historical knowledge really does enable us to free ourselves from the past, the evidence goes entirely in the opposite direction.

In fact, surveying the wreckage of the world bequeathed to us by human action supposedly 'informed' and 'guided' by historical knowledge, we find ourselves already incarcerated inside a world historicized; each of us individually 'shaped' – as Harari remarks – by history. Yet this is a world for which historical knowledge always arrives too late. That it always comes too late, that it always has to come afterwards, in the aftermath, makes a mockery of the claim that more of it is needed in order to make things make sense (as Guldi and Armitage assume). The exponential increase in things, events, and people themselves proves otherwise. By the time one thinks things have been made sense of historically – i.e. by the time one has marshalled enough categorical coordinators to provide a 'context' in which sense can be made – they've already long since changed. In short, historical understanding is constantly confounded by the very change it seeks to comprehend.

As such, *historical comprehension* discovers its limits through a disconcerting lack of continuity in human experience: a continuity, congruence, or compatibility between past and present on which its very existence – its functionality, its reliability – is premised. The present has been, and is being, constantly, radically, and irreparably severed from the past. How things are is evidently not how they were.

¹⁴⁷ Davies, *Historics*, p. 34; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 95.

Only through human technology could this situation emerge. Limitations inherent to the human species test the capacity of human cognition to generate prosthetic aids that exceed them. Technology is the result: it compensates for what previously counted as physical and cognitive constraints on human action. For as Bacon notes, ‘neither the naked hand nor the understanding left to itself can effect much. It is by instruments and helps that the work is done, which are as much wanted for the understanding as for the hand. And as the instruments of the hand either give motion or guide it, so the instruments of the mind supply suggestions for the understanding or cautions’.¹⁴⁸ To date, technical innovations have proven adept at accelerating human history by amplifying the scope of human action, and hence the magnitude of its consequences. In short, technology

has lengthened life; it has mitigated pain; it has extinguished diseases; it has increased the fertility of the soil; it has given new securities to the mariner; it has furnished new arms to the warrior; it has spanned great rivers and estuaries with bridges of form unknown to our fathers; it has guided the thunderbolt innocuously from heaven to earth; it has lighted up the night with the splendour of the day; it has extended the range of human vision; it has multiplied the power of the human muscles; it has accelerated motion; it has annihilated distance; it has facilitated intercourse, correspondence, all friendly offices, all despatch of business; it has enabled man to descend to the depths of the sea, to soar into the air, to penetrate securely into the noxious recesses of the earth...¹⁴⁹

After all, the law of Bacon’s ‘new philosophy’, Macaulay notes further, ‘is progress’: technologically facilitated, its fruits abound, its achievements multiply, but still it ‘never rests’: ‘a point which yesterday was invisible is its goal to-day, and will be its starting point to-morrow’.¹⁵⁰ Fundamentally, Davies notes, through technology ‘human intentions have the capacity unintentionally to produce situations that exceed the scope of historical comprehension’. In other words, ‘with rationality invested in the world, be

¹⁴⁸ Bacon, ‘The New Science’, p. 39.

¹⁴⁹ Macaulay, T. B. ‘Lord Bacon’, in *Critical and Historical Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1883), pp. 403-4.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

it in the form of technological hardware, be it in the form of management procedures, with reality shifting at the pace of thought itself, the world slips away from historical comprehension'.¹⁵¹

As a result, the human mind is thrown into the deepest irresolution. It faces the fact that its principle technology for managing change (historical comprehension as knowledge of what happened), for lending order to historical action, has failed as an adequate administrative system – is actually an administrative system running out of steam. The senseless nature of history as what happens, the speed and scale of its manifestations, hence the inevitable deficiency of historical comprehension itself exposing the inadequacy of history as a technology that can manage human affairs, is reinforced at precisely the moment when it is supposed to lend sense and significance to what occurs.

Final confirmation of this comes out through the idea of the Anthropocene as a *hyper-historicization* which paradoxically seems to both negate and promote human redundancy. Eventually relegated to a stratigraphic layer of the planet's history, this geo-historical epoch will literally fossilise both the morbid evidence of human existence and the staggering consequences of human technology for millions of years to come. It simultaneously confirms the extension of the human intellect by means of its technical instruments into the very chemistry of the planet itself, and its continued failure to alter the socio-economic conditions that promote its historical demise. Ascendant for a time, human existence becomes frail, the putridity of its environment making life increasingly intolerable for those least able to buy their way (temporarily) to safety. Increasingly, the world is no longer the natural human habitat, a safe operating space colonised in the human interest, but a deadly, hostile environment from which we hope to escape. We

¹⁵¹ Davies, *How History Works*, pp. 79 & 82.

hope to escape from history (e.g. to blast off on a lifeboat to Mars) and yet we incessantly turn to it for guidance, like a drowning man searching for more water. The sense of history here becomes one of a world incommensurate with history itself, fundamentally at odds with it, yet forced to fall back on it again and again like the satisfaction of a bad habit.

Indeed, the transmutations of crisis turn us into fugitives with no viable means escape – either from the abyss of the future, or from the present state of confusion. We instead retreat into the past, ransacking it for guidance; in this sense we are, as Valéry puts it, constantly ‘*backing into the future*’, producing more and more historical knowledge to alleviate a situation which that knowledge already proved incapable of helping us to avoid.¹⁵² As he says, ‘history draws up for the imagination a table of situations and catastrophes, a gallery of ancestors, a formulary of acts, expressions, attitudes, and decisions, and presents them to our changeableness and uncertainty, to help us *to become*.’¹⁵³ But to become what? Only to become something *like* we have already been... something historically validated and vouchsafed. In its perpetual mode of crisis induced by history itself, the mind does indeed resort to historical knowledge to comprehend its passage from one form of life to another; hoping desperately to re-establish its equilibrium, its sense of identity with what is happening; to trace continuities and affinities between what was, what is, and what might be. Yet as Davies remarks, ‘the more insecure and unpredictable the world, the more difficult it is to discern any sense in it, the more the organizing rationale of history is needed for reassurance, but the less reassurance it really provides’.¹⁵⁴ Never has this been better exemplified than in the Anthropocene, in which to identify with history – that is, to identify with what the human

¹⁵² Valéry, ‘Historical Fact’, p. 127.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁵⁴ Davies, *Historics*, p. 124.

mind has produced – is today proving an unpleasant prospect. The scale of the ecological failure of historically motivated action, of historical knowledge as a ‘guide’ to human behaviour, is displayed with the most disastrous clarity.

Davies further notes that ‘the world becomes totally historicized once it cannot be told apart from the historical images that comprehend it’. This produces the defining conviction of the historicized world: ‘the idea that the only common sense is a sense of history, the only common place for everyone is history’, as he puts it.¹⁵⁵ The Anthropocene – its historicizing spirit aptly epitomised in Thomas Carlyle’s opinion that ‘we do nothing but enact History, we say little but recite it’ – surely does provide a sense of history common to everyone, but one in which the authority of history, not least human history, has been rescinded.¹⁵⁶ It does indeed offer a common historical place for the human species, given final form in a layer of sedimentary rock into which will be eventually compressed the lasting detritus of this most human age: plastic, concrete and ash particles, the bones of trillions of animals reared for human consumption, and the like.

It is this imagery through which our sense of the irrevocable incoherence of history is confirmed. An endless sequence of untold tomorrows reach back to dispel our dreams of historical unity, and our view of human life under the aspect of history (*sub specie historiae*) enjoins us to despair of any redeeming sense in it. Is it any wonder, in such circumstances, that our species clings ever more fervently to religious eschatology, secure in the knowledge of divine salvation?¹⁵⁷ It is all too easy to forget that for most

¹⁵⁵ Davies, M. L. *Imprisoned by History: Aspects of Historicized Life* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 185 & 103.

¹⁵⁶ Carlyle, T. ‘On History’, *Prose Masterpieces from Modern Essayists* (London: Bickers & Son, 1896), 177.

¹⁵⁷ ‘The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050’. Pew Research Center Webpage, April 2nd 2015. Accessed 20th October 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

people on earth, history is still believed to be providential in nature: that in the contemplation of history one can see not merely a succession of imponderable events, but a ‘course’, a ‘stream’ whose *telos* is ordained by a superior, possibly intervening intelligence residing outside of history altogether. In this conception, the triumphs and sufferings of human beings take shape in relation to purposes of a divine nature. The Anthropocene (as a lived condition as well as a geo-historical classification), by contrast, is a time in which the sense of history is being constantly subverted, its significance rendered unstable. The alignment of human hope and human history – of history as a vehicle for the fulfilment of human happiness; of history as the source or well-spring of human flourishing – is in the Anthropocene a flawed, even fatal, idea.

In historical terms, then, the Anthropocene does aspire to be a comprehensive administrative strategy, a symbolic abstraction from an integrated global object. It would ensure planetary difference is transmogrified into purely human identity: the planet as the comprehensive ‘context’ in which human action occurs. Hence it would imply a certain uniformity in its conditions of possibility. Presumably, planetary potential would reduce to what prevails in the human interest. But what appears expedient to ensure human comprehension (i.e. that we can everywhere encounter ourselves, undisturbed by that which is different to us), seems rather to form an identitary vacuum, without any means of escape from the obligation to identify with what already exists. With what, for the sake of maintaining some form of human historical identity – some semblance of categorical, existential unity – must *continue* to exist, even at the eventual expense of a viable future existence.

Ultimately, instead of a conceptual recrudescence that reconstitutes the conditions of possibility in contemporary culture, the Anthropocene highlights the problem of human intelligibility in an increasingly incomprehensible world. Figuratively, it sets up an

outpost in space from which to survey the planet as a whole. But this vast, impersonal, panoptic perspective nobody actually inhabits. This attempt to make existence cohere simply collapses identity into the same, human thing. It erases difference altogether. That's why the Anthropocene's administrative ethos can only *affirm* ecological dysfunction, not escape it. Its purpose is merely to manage the planet according to an image of what the planet is *like*: that is, *like* the human mind; that earthly apotheosis of conflict, contradiction, and confusion. This requires the strategic diminution and *total identification* of the planet so as to ensure the mind can reconstitute it as a self-referential likeness of itself; can, therefore, take ineluctable precedence over it.

Consequently, this chaotic self-image brings historical administration to its most inert, tautological conclusion. This bitter triumph appears to realise the Promethean effort to be that being which stands at the pinnacle of planetary existence: the being who determines the identity and therefore value of every living thing. The Anthropocene would thereby stake an epochal claim on the past, present, and most ominously, the future. It projects a species merely identical with itself, unable to escape the consequences of what it has produced. Here, 'self-encounter through common humanity is affirmed because there is nothing else: there is either humanity – or else nothing'.¹⁵⁸ At last, the human mind finally identifies itself with its world, and each confirms the poverty of the other. With the Anthropocene pre-empting both present and future within its tautological structure, it leaves its human inhabitants confined to their own, irreparably damaged world-project, facing a diminished existential capacity to live with or escape its consequences.

In this regard, the Anthropocene appears as something monstrous, literally unthinkable: its sheer scale beyond individual or collective comprehension. What the

¹⁵⁸ Davies, 'The proper study of Mankind', p. 262.

Anthropocene signifies (i.e. everything) can never be adequately, let alone finally, experienced. Rather, it can only be observed in miniature, momentarily, via an image or text, through the visceral signs of apprehension thus induced. But for the increasing numbers living on the precipice of chaos, immediately exposed to often lethal, increasingly frequent weather events, swept suddenly off the stage of human action into oblivion, the Anthropocene is violently experienced as the final confirmation of a truth not yet realized by those glued to their info-tainment channels, watching it all unfold from the comfort of the old world, witnessing the new come into existence. That truth is that the human species has already consigned itself and its world to history. That its world is already antiquated, ancient, awaiting supersession. The world of the Anthropocene in this sense would be an emergency room or reverse incubation chamber – a place of incremental transition from one state to another; from health to illness, from life to death, from the human to the inhuman.

3. 'A Self-Incriminating Historical Predicament'

As he looked back upon man moving through History, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! And to such little purpose! There had been mad wilful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than that fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape...

Oscar Wilde¹

We make too much history.

Ursula K. Le Guin²

Today the human mind requires managerial strategies to cope with the ecological failure of its world-project. As I've argued, the Anthropocene as a comprehensive conceptualisation, an informal categorisation in geological time characterised by the transformational impacts of human activity, is the latest attempt to comprehend the world that activity has produced. As such, it forms an example of *historical administration* testifying to the frailty of this world-arrangement, to the lateness of its existence. As previously discussed, administration – administrative *order* – requires identity as a logical principle to recognise whatever exists, to affirm one's own existence. Because history (what happened) already happened, it seems natural to identify (to measure) humanity against it. In summary, then, the Anthropocene is an explicit re-administration of reality – an administrative re-encoding of reality – within a comprehensive geo-historical category. By excluding nothing, it includes everything. It ensures, as an

¹ Wilde, O. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), p. 95.

² Le Guin, U. K. 'Deep in Admiration', in Tsing, A. *et al.* (eds.) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. M19.

indiscriminate, temporally indefinite historical categorisation, the identification of what was with what is; of what is with what was; of what could be with what already is.

Past human actions powered by the fossil economy now administer a fateful, total dose of history to the entire human species, locking it into the danger of its own, mismanaged 'epoch'. Here, I suggest, there's evidently no historical recompense or restitution to be found for human behaviour. This presents a severe and possibly unrecoverable conundrum for historical comprehension in its conventional sense, now realising the *existential*, let alone cognitive, *inadequacy and liability* of history as a guide. The incoherent accumulation of historical knowledge that is always one step behind a torrent of unmanageable events, that is by definition only able to come afterwards, and too late, would suggest that the belief in historical comprehension as a guide to the present and future is a desperate façade, a managerial reflex rendered redundant.

Even so, its redundancy doesn't register: the coercive, historicizing mentality evident in the Anthropocene discourse seeks to extend history's administrative, managerial mandate even further – i.e. as a category it is both *retrospective*, in terms of the past, and *pre-emptive*, in terms of the future. This is because history is supposed to retrospectively infuse the present with meaning by showing how it got to be the way it is, to show on what its sense of identity relies: namely, the past. Equally, history is supposed to act as a guide to future conduct: hence historical categories can't help but pre-empt human responses to the present. But this historicizing strategy, apparently indispensable, has become discredited: not only by philosophical reflection demonstrating that it doesn't work, but by the state of the history-sodden world at large. Instead of 'guiding' human behaviour, it diminishes our subjective sense of things. Instead of supplying meaning, it erodes it. Hence the issue of what one's immediate sense is to make of the Anthropocene,

occluded though it is by the pre-emptive categories of historical administration, needs addressing.

For the contrivance of the Anthropocene, although a secondary abstraction from immediate existence, supersedes one's temporal contingency by comprehensively historicizing it, turning it into a thing of the past. It pertains only tenuously to the life one ordinarily lives, positing a greater historical scheme to which life is bound without the possibility of individual consent or refusal. It is an exemplary consequence of the already historicized world: the world that makes more and more history for itself, that constructs more and more historical knowledge about itself, and hence keeps further antiquating itself. The Anthropocene depends on the idea of historical comprehension, of the reduction of temporal moments to mere components in a larger explanatory sequence, as products of predominant, predeterminate precedents. We 'go down in history', (that is, become 'inscribed' into its 'fabric') as part of a sequential narrative according to history's coercive categorical coordinators. A person's cognitive situation is confronted, then, with the prospect of their temporal occlusion. Hence the Anthropocene, in its decrepitude, gives rise to the apprehensions of incarceration, of time and existence having been *historically mismanaged*.

As the global base of human operations diminishes, the Anthropocene actually betrays a world historically finished: finished not only with the way it was, but with the way it is, and unable to articulate a viable future for the sake of which human action could be mobilised. For this reason, the Anthropocene is at its heart a 'self-incriminating historical predicament', projecting nothing less than 'the aura of a finished world.'³ Already historically superseded, it is haunted, ultimately, by what I call its *retrospective redundancy*.

³ Davies, 'The redundancy of history', p. 335.

The fall into history

Throughout the modern era, generations were able to look back on bygone periods of time with a sense of either satisfaction or regret in having superseded them: how we defined ourselves depended on how we defined and conceptualised the past. In this sense, depending on one's perspective, the past provides evidence of our own upwards development (as when Steven Pinker enthuses about 'the escalator of reason') or incorrigible decline, whether in technological or moral or political terms.⁴ However one conceives it, 'the modern era has been defined by how we speak about the past.'⁵ That is, 'the language of history is a process by which modern society has formed itself as truly modern, escaping and accelerating away from the traditions of the past to improve upon the present and serve as a guide for the future.'⁶

Certainly, human beings like to speculate about the shape of the future, because we want to know where we're going. We want a destiny, a destination, a design. To discern or describe it, however, we need to get 'out ahead of ourselves' (according to Terry Eagleton) since 'it is the very fact that we cannot live in the present – that the present for us is always part of an unfinished project – which converts our lives from chronicles to narratives.'⁷ For Thomas Carlyle, too, history 'is a looking both before and after; as, indeed, the coming Time already waits, unseen, yet definitely shaped, predetermined, and inevitable, in the Time come; and only by the combination of both is the meaning of either comprehended.'⁸ But this is unverifiable sophistry. As Whitehead points out, while the future 'is something for the present', nonetheless 'there are no actual occasions in the

⁴ Pinker, S. *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 834.

⁵ Wilson, R. *The Language of the Past* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁷ Eagleton, T. *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 208-9.

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, 'On History', in *Prose Masterpieces from Modern Essayists* (London: Bickers & Son, 1896), p. 176.

future, already constituted. Thus there are no actual occasions in the future to exercise efficient causation in the present.’⁹ For this reason, as Popper reminds us, since ‘no society can predict, scientifically, its own future states of knowledge’, we are unable therefore to ‘predict the future course of human history.’¹⁰ Consequently, if we cannot know our future states of knowledge, we can neither derive from the ‘before’ knowledge sufficient to conclude to a certainty that ‘the coming Time’ is already ‘definitely shaped’ by ‘the Time come’, and nor can we therefore derive from the unknown ‘after’ insight sufficient to discern in retrospect the meaning of the present moment.

Yet for Eagleton, ‘we cannot choose to live non-historically: history is quite as much our destiny as death.’¹¹ As if to confirm this premise, the Anthropocene conveniently assures us of this alleged inability to live ‘non-historically’, since human history itself has been comprehensively incorporated into the history of the planet: we have shifted from being merely historical agents to geohistorical agents. For this reason, the Anthropocene contributes to what I earlier called the *hyper-historical* turn in the human sciences, so keen are scholars to adopt it as part of the academic’s conceptual (managerial) toolkit. As Chakrabarty notes, ‘the geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history.’¹² McKenzie Wark remarks that ‘one can indeed think (with Morton) the Anthropocene as a new historical age in which humans are no longer excluded. Or one can do the reverse, which is perhaps more challenging, and is the point the earth sciences have arrived at: a new state of geology in which humans are included.’¹³ Here, Lewis and Maslin observe, ‘we humans are not just influencing the present. For the first time in earth’s 4.5 billion year history, a single

⁹ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, pp. 223 & 227.

¹⁰ Popper, K. *The Poverty of Historicism* (Oxford & New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. xiii.

¹¹ Eagleton, p. 209

¹² Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History’, p. 212.

¹³ Wark, M. *General Intellects: Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century* (London & New York: Verso, 2017), pp. 274-75

species is increasingly dictating its future': we are 'a new force of nature' wielding historically unprecedented power.¹⁴

So as an epoch, a geo-historical categorisation, a comprehensive structure of historical coherence, the Anthropocene at bottom constitutes an administrative manoeuvre. The thing it is intended to manage and comprehend – in vain – is history itself. It invokes both an image and an account of history: of a time falling out of existence, moving into the past, replaced by another. The time it replaces, the epoch it supersedes, is the Holocene: a roughly 11,700-year period of relatively stable climate conducive to the flourishing of human civilisation. Yet what the Anthropocene explicitly shows is that human beings have achieved an unprecedented technological capacity to historically supersede themselves. Concurrently, however, the Anthropocene also possesses the unmistakable aura of historical immersion, with history constituting a category of inescapable proportions comprising people, objects, and events of every type and significance. This increasing interest in historical congruence, in the existential unification of things fatally bound together, intersects with fashionable reflections on ever deeper forms of material entanglement. The appeal to ever longer scales of time, to the explanatory value of ever larger quantities of history, is its primary symptom.

In their introduction to the volume *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, for example, the editors lyrically describe the 'ghosts' carried upon 'the wings of the Anthropocene.'¹⁵ For them, 'the word tells a big story' of contemporary ecological collapse perpetuated by short-term greed. The solution? More historical awareness, more attentiveness to history, more stories: in short, more history. 'Our experiments', they remark, 'combine natural history and vernacular *legacies*, learning from *precedents* nourished by *other times* and

¹⁴ Lewis, S. L. & Maslin, M. A. *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* (Pelican Books, 2018), p. 3.

¹⁵ Tsing, A. et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. G1.

places' (my emphasis).¹⁶ For Donna Haraway, too, the injunction is clear: 'stories for the Anthropocene must *learn* with these *complex histories*', she says (my emphasis).¹⁷ Jens-Christian Svenning remarks that 'attention to longer histories allows us to appreciate the rich, diverse landscapes that have existed in pasts beyond human memory.'¹⁸ But what 'learning' is actually occasioned by the construction of these complex histories? What stories can compensate for the burning of the Amazon rainforest? What do longer histories have to offer except more incriminating evidence of human despoliation? What do they actually amend or redeem? Such hollow bromides signal a lack of substance: summoning only a retrogressive, recursive reversion to history: that idea of all ideas, that category of all categories.

A recent responder to this (by definition) historical situation, Clive Hamilton wonders, and not for the first time, 'does history have a meaning?'¹⁹ Peering into 'the Anthropocene future' (already historically pre-empted), he can't help but ask 'how does this latest *stage* in the *human story fit into the Earth's story*?' (my emphasis). Here 'story' assumes a type of disclosure which its internal structure is designed to deliver: namely, the disclosure of meaning. As Arendt remarks, 'the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.'²⁰ Thus in *The History Manifesto*, Guldi and Armitage discern the need for a new trend in the writing of history, one involving 'a *fusion* between the big and the small, the micro and the macro' (my emphasis). A 'public future' demands an increase in the scale of historical enquiry in order to comprehend it: 'the seeds of a new conversation about the future of the past

¹⁶ *Arts of Living*, p. G10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. M44

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. G68.

¹⁹ Hamilton, C. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 116.

²⁰ Arendt, H. *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1970), p. 104.

and the big picture are already planted, indeed they represent the reasons why Big History, Deep History, and the Anthropocene are on the rise already.²¹

Attractively, the synthesis of happenings into story form invests them with a significance that exceeds what they may or may not have meant individually at the time of their occurrence, hence conferring upon them a surplus semantic value. What in isolation might remain otherwise indeterminate or ambiguous events may nevertheless, when juxtaposed with events of similar likeness, appear to form a ‘path’, or evince a ‘trajectory’, a historical ‘trend’. This requires, however, a further investment of categorical coordinators that provide historical stability: e.g. ‘epoch’, ‘age’, ‘phase’, or ‘period’.

Supposing one thought history was a science whose practitioners could decipher the shape of the ‘human story’, you might be tempted to offer this, the most popular metaphor for the ‘historical process’, which itself can be articulated due to a confluence of historical *factors* or intangible *forces* the historian can alone discern:

The process of the history of mankind can best be likened to the flow of a river. It has a source; at the beginning it is no more than a brook, then come broader reaches; stagnant backwaters and off-shoots, rapids and waterfalls may occur... Whether the metaphorical analogy between history and the flow of a river is sufficient to allow us to suppose that the river of history will finally fall into a historical sea, or the historical process will be brought to an end by the intervention of some still unknown forces is something which is difficult to prognosticate.²²

Difficult, perhaps, but for the more farsighted historian, able to peer into the furthest reaches of historical time and expatiate on history’s flowing ‘path’, far from impossible. Diakonoff even sets out eight ‘phases’ to the entire ‘historical process’ as he conceives it.

²¹ Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, p. 118.

²² Diakonoff, I. M. *The Paths of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1.

A later attempt to offer an overview of 12,000 years of human history occurs in *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*, published in 2003. Rather than the standard 'river' metaphor, the authors offer the metaphor of 'webs of interaction in human history'; where a 'web is a set of connections that link people to one another. These connections may take many forms: chance encounters, kinship, friendship, common worship, rivalry, enmity, economic exchange, political cooperation, even military competition.'²³ 'Today, although people experience it in vastly different ways, *everyone lives inside a single global web, a unitary maelstrom* of cooperation and competition. The career of these webs of communication and interaction constitutes the *overarching structure* of human history' (my emphasis).²⁴ Indeed, this totalising, overarching human structure now incorporates the earth itself, devouring it entirely: 'We have inaugurated a new era of earth history – the *Anthropocene* – in which our actions are the most important factor in biogeochemical flows and geological processes... With luck, this perspective on the past will shed a ray of light on the dilemmas of the present – and future.'²⁵ This hope, echoed by Hamilton and others, emulates Thucydides' belief that his history of the Peloponnesian War will be

judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.²⁶

Eagleton's solipsistic premise – that history, concerning human beings, cannot be denied, let alone evaded – is reiterated by many of the authors to whom I've referred. As

²³ McNeill, J. R. & McNeill, W. H. *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.23.4 (online). <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekTexts&getid=1&query=Thuc.%201.23.4>

they like to remind us, in being heterogeneous yet totalising, the Anthropocene is something ‘inescapable’. In this sense, its redundancy works pre-emptively to occlude any redemptive response. Dryzek and Pickering, for instance, soberly warn that the Anthropocene, as ‘humanity’s chronic condition’, ‘is inescapable, and must be negotiated’; indeed it ‘admits of no response that is permanently adequate.’²⁷ Historians Bonneuil and Fressoz point out that ‘the Anthropocene is here. It is our new condition. We have therefore to learn to survive.’²⁸ McNeill and Engelke close their environmental history of the Anthropocene with the forbidding remark that ‘since we cannot exit the Anthropocene, we will adjust to it, one way or another.’²⁹

So now, although history is being unmade with extraordinary rapidity – i.e. ‘living arrangements that took millions of years to put into place are being undone in the blink of an eye’ – it nevertheless collapses into the same, incarcerating order of geohistorical time.³⁰ As when, for example, we are told we need to ‘get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly’, or that the Anthropocene forces us ‘into a new kind of historicity’ wherein ‘the deep time of geology, climate, and natural science is collapsing into the historical time of human technology’, a collapse which fundamentally displays ‘life’s historical entanglement with death.’³¹

In this respect, climatic feedback loops now ensure that the past erupts into the present: triggered by hotter temperatures caused by previous emissions, Arctic wildfires on an unprecedented scale have this year (2019) released more carbon dioxide than in the previous eight. So, the cycle of breakdown continues as yet more ‘past’ is created, laid down in sediment, as the increasing fires, floods, droughts, and heatwaves of a

²⁷ Dryzek and Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, p. 11.

²⁸ Bonneuil, C. & Fressoz, J-B. *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 289.

²⁹ McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, p. 211.

³⁰ *Arts of Living*, p. G1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. G2 & G12.

warming world uproot the lives of people and animals, destroying environments once fit for habitation. ‘Such Arctic wildfires are expected to become more common as the planet warms. There’s geologic precedent for that: layers of black charcoal in sediments in the Canadian Arctic suggest that wildfires frequently raged across the region during the Pliocene epoch, when global atmospheric CO₂ levels were between 350 and 450 parts per million – similar to today.’³² Here in the increasingly antiquated landscapes of the historicized world, ‘assemblages of the dead gather together with the living’, as ‘every landscape’ becomes ‘haunted by its human and non-human histories.’³³

Indifferent to its incarcerating dimension, Bruno Latour writes in favour of the Anthropocene due to its ability to ‘bring ourselves back down to Earth.’³⁴ ‘At the very moment it was becoming fashionable to speak of the ‘post-human’ in the blasé tones of those who know that the time of the human is ‘outdated’, the ‘Anthropos’ has come back – and with a vengeance.’ But he also notes – as he must – that it ‘brings history back to the center of attention’:³⁵

In the Great Enclosure where we are now confined, an eye is fixed on us, but it is not the eye of God fixed on Cain crouching down in the tomb; it is the eye of Gaia looking straight at us, in broad daylight. Impossible, from now on, to remain indifferent. From now on, *everything is looking at us.*

We have made of nature something human, are mixed up in it to such an extent that it is nothing ‘external, indifferent, inhuman’, but has ‘become internal, human, all too human.’³⁶ Latour’s ‘Gaia’ (to be sure, ‘historical through and through’³⁷) is a misty,

³² Gramling, C. ‘The Arctic is burning and Greenland is melting, thanks to record heat’. *Science News* webpage, 2nd August 2019. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/arctic-burning-greenland-melting-thanks-record-heat>

³³ Ibid., p. G5.

³⁴ Latour, B. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, translated by Porter, C. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 124.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 254.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 288.

imprecise ‘entity’, one so variegated, so heterogeneous, so interconnected, so inextricable, that one wonders if it offers anything beyond the further ‘post-human’ redistribution of agency it entails. The desire for complete submersion – ‘to slip into, envelop ourselves within, a large number of loops’ – reiterates that in a resolutely flat ontology, there cannot be any ‘point’, ‘whole’, or ‘centre’ that one could scale. Everything reduces to an endless loop, each of which must be ‘endlessly’ ‘recounted, traced, replayed, and ritualized.’³⁸

Hence, Latour offers only the conundrum of entanglement without exit. Tellingly, he remarks that ‘it would be thrilling to live in such an era, if only we could contemplate the tragedy from a distant shore that would have *no history*. But from now on there are no more spectators, because there is *no shore that has not been mobilized in the drama of geohistory*’ (my emphasis).³⁹ The Anthropocene can mean only the confinement of history, crystallising its hold over human cognition: ‘if there is no frame, no goal, no direction, we have to consider Gaia as the name of the process by which variable and contingent occurrences have made *later* events more probable. In this sense, Gaia... closely resembles what we have come to regard *as history itself*.’⁴⁰

For Timothy Morton, too, the Anthropocene entails the ‘inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.’⁴¹ For him, ‘the end of the world is correlated with the Anthropocene’, insofar as the ‘world’ stands in conceptually for the idea of a coherent object standing at a safe distance from human beings. Now intruding into what formerly constituted the sovereign human realm is planetary history, which extends into an unfathomably deep past and unimaginably far future. In this sense, ‘there is no

³⁸ Ibid., p. 276.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 45 & 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴¹ Morton, T. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 7.

pristine, no Nature, *only history*.’ (my emphasis).⁴² Latour’s initial tautology is complete: once again, the historicized mind has seemingly no option but to concede precedence to history.

In the same spirit of historical immersion, Amitav Ghosh concludes that ‘the earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast.’⁴³ There exists a constant ‘historic encounter’ as we are enjoined to accede to our historical fate, acknowledging ‘a history that impinges on every life on this planet’. His attempt to comprehend climate change by necessity aligns with every other effort to do so: one must outline a historical narrative of how we came to be where we are. Caught in this already historicized mentality, Ghosh uncritically employs the Anthropocene as a colloquialism for climatic crisis and terrestrial degradation. Using it commits him to a narrative of incremental human expropriation of the planet. Unfortunately, it also means that he absurdly renders ‘every human being who has ever lived’ culpable in producing climate breakdown, with an undifferentiated ‘humanity’ made universally responsible. Illustrating a condition in which human agency is denied any real potency even while at the centre of planetary affairs, he claims that ‘the events of today’s changing climate, in that they represent the totality of human actions over time, represent also the terminus of history. For if the entirety of our past is contained within the present, then temporality itself is drained of significance...’⁴⁴

History is terminal, ultimately, because it renders us incapable of exceeding it. ‘All human history’ is ‘distilled’ in the form of ‘climate events’. We are forced to confront a past (pollutants, ideas, modes of social and political conduct) intruding on every aspect

⁴² Ibid., pp. 58.

⁴³ Ghosh, A. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

of our lives. Unsurprisingly, then, Ghosh is waylaid by history at every turn, ‘entrapped’ (as he says) by it. His ruminations on ‘the chronology of global warming’ evince only the redundancy of historical knowledge, exposing its irrepressible lateness. For, after noting the ‘complexity of the history of the carbon economy’, he leads us to a conclusion in complete conformity with his historicizing strategy: ‘our lives and our choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us no-where to turn but toward our self-annihilation.’⁴⁵ This is precisely the dilemma of the historicized mind ensnared in its self-incriminating historical situation: history always does, in the end, leave one stranded exactly where one already is. Always it comes too late to make any difference. History now confirms the antiquation of humanity itself.

Clive Hamilton concurs: ‘the Anthropocene arrives as the *totalizing event* par excellence ... If not every human being is responsible for bringing on the Anthropocene, *every human is destined to live in it*. A new narrative of narratives cannot be a simple reinvention of the old, for the first lesson of the Anthropocene is that a new ‘philosophy of history’ must be a *merged history* of humans and Earth taken together’ (my emphasis).⁴⁶ Unable to exit the Anthropocene, we are apparently doomed to live in it in perpetuity: a situation as redundant as it is ‘inescapable’.

Amplified superfluity; encroaching irrelevance

As these examples show, the Anthropocene is but the latest historicization that makes human existence itself a thing of the past. By definition inescapable, it is a managerial contrivance that both confirms and facilitates planetary incarceration. As the above

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁶ Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, p. 77.

examples also reveal, we are informed that we are ‘in’ the Anthropocene, implying not only a carceral dimension to human existence, but that this carceral dimension rests explicitly upon our identification with the world as it has become. As it is (as it necessarily must be), so are we. As we are, so it is. As the principle of identity on which the Anthropocene rests dictates, man is author, editor, and interpreter of a world built to house his own history, to confirm the bond of identity, of belonging, to which human beings aspire.

If the disenchanted world was the world cleansed of mythology, of our prodigious fictions and epistemological confusions, this re-enchanted world is the world brought under the phantasy of Human History, compounding its narcissism, shoring up its solipsism, accountable to nothing but itself. Indeed, after God, in order to understand himself, man had to make doing and knowing one and the same thing. Now the colonised planet becomes a vast experimentation facility or technosphere expressly devoted to the making of man, so that he can finally see ‘its nature reflected in the human mind’, and, conversely, the nature of the human mind reflected in ‘the world of nations’. For as Vico continues, ‘there can be no more certain history than that which is recounted by its creator’; thus in this synchrony mankind ‘creates [his] own world of measurable quantities’. Wherein, as with God before him, ‘knowledge and creation are *the same thing*’ (my emphasis).⁴⁷ Yet it’s an increasingly lethal equation: an unsustainable symmetry. The Anthropocene merely reflects back upon its subject, ‘man’, his centuries of ceaseless industry; the effluvia of capitalist production envelops the earth and penetrates into its very depths, while the toxic run-off reappears in human tissue.

⁴⁷ Vico, *New Science*, p. 129.

For instance, microplastic particles containing various chemicals are absorbed via air, food, and water;⁴⁸ the means of subsistence – including reliable weather patterns essential to agricultural production – are compromised through the belching of harmful substances into the atmosphere leading to a rapidly warming world; and nutrients are leached from topsoil faster than they can be replenished, thus affecting our future ability to grow enough food.⁴⁹ Disturbingly, the individual becomes a clone reflecting the wider system, a host (of sorts) carrying around chemical compounds whose harm to their creators has yet to be fully established. This loss of control (we do have to breathe, eat, and drink, after all) causes further apprehension.

To employ an image borrowed from chemistry, the Anthropocene evinces on a massive scale a phenomenon known as ‘secondary efflorescence’: a chemical reaction to the absorption of saline in infrastructure. Typically, a structure may display ‘primary efflorescence’, which occurs when water evaporates after migrating to the surface of a porous substance (such as brick or concrete), leaving salt deposits upon the masonry. In secondary efflorescence, however, saline is absorbed and begins to dissolve the material from within (a concrete bridge, perhaps). In advanced cases, the integrity of the structure is compromised. From waterways, soil, and air, to the human body itself, vital systems are eroded both from without and within in a symbiotic relationship of mutual breakdown: e.g. air pollution is increasingly linked to ill-health, and rising temperatures across the world are exceeding the thermal limits of the human body: that is, its capacity

⁴⁸ Forster, K. ‘Microplastics in the sea a growing threat to human health, United Nations warns’, in *The Independent* webpage, 21 May 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/microplastics-microbeads-ocean-sea-serious-health-risks-united-nations-warns-a7041036.html>

⁴⁹ Yang, S. ‘Human security at risk as depletion of soil accelerates, scientists warn’, in *Berkeley News* webpage, 7th May 2015. <https://news.berkeley.edu/2015/05/07/soil-depletion-human-security/>

to cool down sufficiently to survive. Indeed, by the end of the century, ‘substantial parts of the Earth’s surface may be too hot and humid for human thermoregulation.’⁵⁰

No wonder ‘reality is at its height’, Baudrillard wryly observes: ‘by our technical exploits, we have reached such a degree of reality and objectivity that we might even speak of an excess of reality, which leaves us more anxious and disconcerted than the lack of it.’ There is no ability to surpass or negate this burdensome excess, however, ‘since we are already beyond.’ The world has become an imponderable waste management facility, left shovelling the refuse of centuries into landfill, while the overflow of history spills out to engulf it once more. Tragically, ironically, ‘the whole of modernity had as its aim the coming of this real world, the liberation of men and of real energies’ from slavish superstition, and ‘bent upon the objective transformation of the world.’ This mission accomplished, today ‘the world has become real beyond our wildest expectations. The real and the rational have been overturned by their very realization.’⁵¹

Indeed, as a historical formation presenting the world as it really is, as the way it has got to be the way it is, the Anthropocene ‘affirms the existing world order’, therefore becoming ‘indistinguishable from its referent.’⁵² Signifying a comprehensively historicized world, it constitutes among other things a world always historically pre-empted. This universal conception of reality ends up already preceding it, anticipating it, and incriminating those inhabiting it. In these completely historicized circumstances, then, occurs a ‘remarkable predicament’: burdened with ‘an inheritance of historical erudition, as redundant as it is comprehensive’, the Anthropocene leaves ‘everyone in their immediate, existential situation more vulnerable and apprehensive’ than in any previously conjectured ‘state of nature’. For the human subject, this finite, ‘finished’

⁵⁰ Matthews, T. ‘Humid heat and climate change’, in *Progress in Physical Geography: Earth and Environment*, Vol. 42, Issue 3 (2018), p. 391 pp. 391-405.

⁵¹ Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 65.

⁵² Davies, ‘The redundancy of history’, p. 341.

world, Davies concludes, ‘henceforth confronts in it nothing other than itself, its own redundancy.’⁵³

Identity is, after all, predicated on redundancy. As Gregory Bateson points out, ‘communication *is* the creation of redundancy’ through ‘patterning and predictability’.⁵⁴ In combining both mind and world, observer and world observed into one, the self-referential semiotic structure of the Anthropocene conspires to ‘make the universe of the observer more predictable, more ordered, and more redundant.’ For when ‘we say that a message has ‘meaning’ or is ‘about’ some referent, what we mean is that there is a larger universe of relevance consisting of message-plus-referent, and that redundancy or pattern or predictability is introduced into this universe by the message.’⁵⁵ In this, our ‘consensus appellation for our current geological age’, humanity withdraws into itself, becoming ‘a singular, self-absorbed species’, one ‘racing toward being, ultimately, alone and aloof in a sterile cosmos.’⁵⁶ No wonder E. O. Wilson prefers the term ‘Eremocene’, or Age of Loneliness as a better catch-all, observing as he does the mass extinction of species as quickly as they are discovered.

In the consequent isolation it imposes, the Anthropocene neutralises through the identitary thinking it demands the requisite dimension of refusal essential to human emancipation. If thinking can aspire only to the self-same, wherein the parameters of understanding are pre-empted, existential self-orientation is automatically blocked: thinking and reality conform to, are reduced to, the same dimension of possibility. The possible becomes the actual: the actual dictates the horizon of the possible. As a historicizing move, it operates in a superfluous circle or shadowland where, ‘describing

⁵³ Davies, ‘The redundancy of history in a historicized world’, pp. 350-51 & 346.

⁵⁴ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 412.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

⁵⁶ Newman, R. D. ‘The Humanities in the Age of Loneliness’. *Los Angeles Review of Books* webpage, 19th August 2019. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/humanities-age-loneliness/>

merely its own identity’, the Anthropocene orientates the human species around itself.⁵⁷ In this, its anthropic bias, the Anthropocene ensures thought and being converge on the same, historically pre-empted reality.

Retrospection and redundancy

Attempting to conceptualise the ‘sense’ of history in this epoch defined by tautological self-reference stems from a nagging misgiving about the Anthropocene, even beyond its obvious anthropocentrism: namely, that since the Anthropocene merely confirms history as ‘the dominant form of human self-comprehension in a world dominated by global capitalism’, it can only re-antiquate human existence itself.⁵⁸ The Anthropocene thus amplifies the historical redundancy already inscribed into the structure of capitalist society, and on which that society depends. It affirms a reality comprehensively described yet inadequately controlled; a history constantly summoned yet continually found wanting; and a future always pre-empted yet forever unforeseen. The tautological redundancy of this self-same world not only ‘sanctions solipsism’, but pre-emptively prevents any perspective that might supersede it.⁵⁹

Fundamentally, the Anthropocene is a place ‘in which we are *condemned to the infinite retrospective of all that has preceded us*’; a place where, lacking anything truly other than ourselves, we are forced to look back in apprehension at the accreted waste of human endeavour (my emphasis).⁶⁰ In this way, the redundancy it imposes, the existential irrelevance it ensures, works retrospectively. Ideally, retrospection standardly offers the capacity to look back with hindsight upon occurrences in the immediate or distant past.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 345.

⁵⁸ Davies, M. L. ‘Cognitive inadequacy: history and the technocratic management of an artificial world’, in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2016), p. 334.

⁵⁹ Davies, ‘The redundancy of history in a historicized world’, p. 339.

⁶⁰ Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p. 25.

It alerts us to what we didn't, or couldn't, have realised at the time of their occurrence. Through retrospection, the renewed absence of days gone by functions to highlight the disparities between what was and what is: it alerts us to the mismatch between past happenstance and present consciousness. The Anthropocene categorisation – loosely conceptualising the duration of human planetary existence and its aftermath – not only presents to immediate consciousness its own, decrepit circumstances (encapsulated in the degradation of the biosphere), but a retrospective view of human existence seen from the far future: from a 'world without us', in which the debris of countless civilisations have slowly sunk, over millions of years, into the sediment of deep time. In this way, even while being reassuringly modern, at the forefront, 'ahead of the curve', always seeking the latest thing, human life is fundamentally characterised by redundancy – not only in existential terms, but in terms of knowledge, of ideas, that are defined above all by their lateness. Hence *retrospective redundancy* attempts to conceptualise this condition of unprecedented superfluity and obsolescence the Anthropocene entails, symptomised by the radical lateness of human existence: of our being located afterwards, in the aftermath, yet also, apprehensively, *before*, as the future hones into view as something radically other than human, something unrecognisable in human terms: which is to say, *historical* terms.

We find ourselves located, here, at the limits of historical comprehension or human anticipation. The subsequent despondency, the sense of being historically 'badly placed', of having arrived too late, stretches credulity, flying in the face of modernity's hopes for the unfolding betterment of human existence:

We are the rearguard; not only a rearguard, but a somewhat isolated rearguard, sometimes almost abandoned. A company left in the lurch. We are almost specimens. We are going to be, we ourselves will be, archives, tablets, fossils, witnesses and survivors from these historic times. Tablets to be consulted. We are extremely badly placed. Chronologically.

In the succession of generations. We are the rearguard, in very poor touch, out of touch with the main body, the generations of the past... We are the last. Almost the ones after the last. Immediately after us begins the world we call, which we have called, which we shall not cease calling, the modern world. The world that tries to be clever. The world of the intelligent, of the advanced...

Yet our situation is now more precarious than even Péguy could envisage or anticipate. The human species is left, distraught, at the mercy of its antiquated and misguided historical actions, conceptualisations, and categories intended to guide its future existence, yet confronts a situation in which historical comprehension itself – its traditional means of orientation, of comprehension, of identity – is rendered redundant: without recourse to what already happened to make sense of what is happening now, because it is without precedent in human history. In other words, the world historically unprecedented renders history itself redundant. Such a situation dissipates reason, dissolves rationality, historicizes history:

Thoughts, instincts, races, habits which were nature itself to us, which we took for granted, on which we lived, and which were the forms of life, and which consequently no one thought about, which were more than legitimate, more than unquestioned: unreasoned, have become what is worst of all: theses, historical theses, hypotheses, I mean all that is least solid, most inexistent... When a *régime*, from being organic has become logical, and from being alive has become historical, that *régime* is done for.⁶¹

It is for this reason that the Anthropocene exudes the forlorn, administrative effort of a world long since overtaken by history, of a species doomed to historical subservience and, already, historical irrelevance. It signals a time already fading into the past, turning itself into history.

Yet its widespread adoption exhibits what Davies calls ‘the fundamental delusion of the comprehensively historicized world’: namely, that the ‘historicizing description of

⁶¹ Péguy, C. *Temporal and Eternal*, translated by Dru, A. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), pp. 7 & 85.

the world one lives in has a privileged meaning *in* that world for the life one lives there.’⁶² But what connection does the encapsulating conception of the Anthropocene have to the reality it is supposed to encompass? Neither compensating for present troubles nor clarifying any possible resolution to them, the crisis of human identity, of human understanding, the Anthropocene signals is at bottom a crisis of historical comprehension, of history as the measure of humanity. It becomes a crisis in our sense of history, and so, conversely, *in the sense history is supposed to make of us*. This crisis of historical sense stems in particular from the encounter in the Anthropocene with temporal scales that would remain otherwise wholly remote.

Discrepant temporalities; convergent realities

In 1857, two years prior to Darwin’s seismic intervention in human self-consciousness, Philip Gosse, one of the most competent and devout naturalists of his day, published a book entitled *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot*. In this eccentric response to the growing discrepancy between what he called ‘the works and the Word of God’, Gosse aimed to reconcile the then emerging evidence of the geological record, which testified to the earth’s great antiquity, with the Biblical account of its genesis a mere handful of millennia previously.⁶³ Forced by his literal reading of scripture to accept that God had taken no more than six days to fashion the world, he thus propounded what must have appeared to him an ingenious solution, designed to safeguard theology in the face of geology: namely, that God had provided his creation with only the outward appearance of enormous age – a detailed simulation of a past that never existed – at the moment of its inception.

⁶² Davies, ‘The redundancy of history’, p. 351.

⁶³ Gosse, P. H. *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: John Van Voorst, 1857), p. 5.

This entailed that all vestiges of life's origin and development were a deception supplied, apparently, on behalf of the human species. Evolutionary biologist Steven Jay Gould describes Gosse's idea, in his essay 'Adam's Navel', as follows:

Why should we not believe that he created strata and fossils to give modern life a harmonious order by granting it a sensible (if illusory) past? As God provided Adam with a navel to stress continuity with future men, so too did he endow a pristine world with the appearance of an ordered history. Thus the Earth might be but a few thousand years old, as Genesis literally affirmed, and still record an apparent tale of untold aeons.⁶⁴

It's possible, in other words, that the observation of an antecedent order of historical development, the false evidence of elapsed time, might soothe one's encounter with a bewildering world brought into existence at the behest of an inscrutable power.

Certainly, the idea lends itself to speculation concerning the character of the divinity that engineered the hoax, and the ramifications of its human apprehension. In the latter regard, it could be entirely benign on condition that the deception remained, in perpetuity, a secret. But its exposure would at the very least test the fortitude of the faithful. Jean Baudrillard, who also comments on the implications of Gosse's hypothesis, suggests that while God's cunning simulation of history could be construed as the provision of a beneficent author, sparing his creation anguish by providing for them an orientating fiction, it might equally be an illusion with humorous or even malicious intent.⁶⁵ In any case, the fraud must have been implemented with the intention, benevolent or not, to deceive.

What is undeniable is that the entire idea makes a mockery of, and renders useless, all human efforts to secure for themselves knowledge pertaining to their origins, or

⁶⁴ Gould, S. J. 'Adam's Navel'. *Granta*, 1st June 1985 (online) Accessed October 19th 2018. <https://granta.com/adams-navel/>

⁶⁵ Baudrillard, J. *The Perfect Crime*, translated by Chris Turner (London & New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 21-25.

concerning the structure of the inhabited world. If what is meant to be taken as true about the world is in fact false, wouldn't this reveal the low esteem in which God must hold the human mind, leaving us to our futile endeavours to accrue knowledge that, based on an illusion, was never worth knowing? If humanity is but the plaything of a God who can give what is false the impression of being true, where rests the assurance of truth? What secures the possibility of knowledge? Gosse, however, with all the fanaticism necessary to sustain his conviction, insisted that although God had created the illusion of a history that had never really happened, and that 'knowing' this history thus made no real difference to anything, studying it was still of value precisely because he had created it. In any event, upon its publication Gosse's argument failed to win any significant converts. It implanted only the suspicion that God was a dissembling trickster on a cosmic scale – a conclusion unpalatable to believers convinced of his omnibenevolence. But its chief failing lay in the untestable and hence unfalsifiable nature of its assertions, although later the equally inert idea of a world that might have sprung into existence mere minutes earlier received philosophical treatment at the hands of Bertrand Russell. Gosse's fable now languishes in a preposterous footnote to the history of self-deception.

I mention this obscure case not simply to marvel at the lengths to which human beings will go to confirm what they already believe when faced with evidence to the contrary (hardly a rare phenomenon), but as a means of highlighting the current discrepancy between the 'works' and the 'world': between the historical works of humankind, intended to produce a world fit for human habitation, and the historicized, decrepit world in which those works have actually resulted. Here, the planet's deteriorating climate, increasingly hostile to extant life, does indict the calamitous tenure of the human species. But it also makes a mockery of historical knowledge, of those billions of words, in countless volumes, mouldering on library shelves or in digital repositories, highlighting

the disjunction between the ‘works’ and the ‘word’. Just as Gosse’s hypothesis brought the integrity of God’s creation into question, so too does the present world invalidate the authority of its history. Its capacity to unify past, present, and future is exposed as insufficiently illusory. Now the human species encounters in its constant self-historicization, its need to make more and more history for itself, only forms of life or modes of functioning long cast into disrepute, long since rendered irrelevant to its current crisis.

Gosse raised the prospect of history as an act of charlatanry on the part of God which nevertheless might function as a means of recompense and reconciliation – as instrumental, even elemental, in the composition of a meaningful world. But today, the obsessive recourse to historical explanation, to the solidifying, unifying function of historical narrative, intensifies even as its efficacy and reliability diminishes. This paradox invites renewed attempts to articulate what is felt in our consciousness of history that says something about what it means to be historically conscious today, to live in a historically unprecedented situation.

Rather like Gosse, today we are confronted with the demand to reconcile our increasing knowledge of climatic crisis – not least its painful history which discloses how the mess might have been avoided – with who we have been told we historically are, and where we are going.⁶⁶ Liberal humanism, a story about ourselves so convincing that it ushered in a global techno-sphere owned and operated by human beings, is a story putting itself out of date. The idea of a harmonious order of historical development, which harkens to the human need for security, to know what will happen next, seems increasingly incompatible with the world human endeavour has created. The total

⁶⁶ Rich, N. ‘Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change’. *New York Times Magazine*, August 1st 2018 (online). Accessed November 1st 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/01/magazine/climate-change-losing-earth>

implementation of the human artifice has been confirmed, but it comes at unimaginable cost.

Truly, it seems no-one alive can avoid the encroaching encounter with history or flee the spectre of historical supersession that haunts the Anthropocene. Our lethal entanglement with natural history, the unleashing of forces beyond our control, has what Chakrabarty calls ‘profound, even transformative, implications for how we think about human history... Indeed, what scientists have said about climate change challenges... the ideas about the human that usually sustain the discipline of history.’⁶⁷ It is thus common today to speak and write both of a critical conjuncture in history, and of a consequent change in historical consciousness, forced to confront histories (of our species, of nature, of the planet itself) that challenge and disrupt notions of historical understanding traditionally couched in solely human terms. This conjuncture is best described as a clash of temporalities, as a merging of human and planetary time, of human and planetary history, in which collective human action produces consequences far beyond the scale of a human lifespan.

As Jesse Oak Taylor points out, the events of history today can be seen as components of chronic and ongoing catastrophe:

Like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, the stratigraphers of the distant future might well perceive the fossil fuel era as a single catastrophic stratum rather than a string of discernable events. This is a profoundly anti-humanist vision of history, perhaps even more so than the stratigraphic debate itself acknowledges, because the *anthropos* in question is not exclusively “human” but rather a vast, multi-species, multi-substance assemblage made up of coal, capital, human labor, atmospheric dynamics, and sedimentary processes. Even more troublingly, the timescales on which it operates obliterate not only individual

⁶⁷ Chakrabarty, D. ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), p. 198.

humans but also the kinds of social, national, and class differences that are usually the stuff of historical inquiry.⁶⁸

It is this implication of accelerating ecological and climatic disruption, the wholesale erasure of human subjectivity swallowed up and deposited in the sediment of millions of years hence (a sediment which will be largely composed of long-deceased chickens), which concerns Chakrabarty, who recognises that ‘the crisis of climate change’ challenges ‘our capacity for historical understanding.’⁶⁹ In an article entitled ‘Anthropocene Time’, he highlights the distinction between thinking in human time, in terms of the world history that records and coordinates the deeds of human beings, and geological time, which operates in terms of the planet’s four and a half billion years of existence. As he points out:

There is widespread recognition now that we are passing through a unique phase of human history when, for the first time ever, we consciously connect events that happen on vast, geological scales – such as changes to the whole climate system of the planet – with what we might do in the everyday lives of individuals, collectivities, institutions, and nations (such as burning fossil fuels).⁷⁰

This clash of otherwise discrepant temporalities, of traditionally incompatible scales, produces the understanding, lately acquired, that the sorts of everyday human actions once expected to exert effects proportional to the human time scales in which they occurred, have actually induced effects on planetary systems many orders of magnitude greater than any single human being can observe or experience. This loss of symmetry between actions undertaken and the consequences those actions might reasonably have been expected to produce inspires a sense of vertigo. Even the relatively miniscule

⁶⁸ Taylor, J. O. ‘Anthropocene Inscriptions: Reading Global Synchrony’, in *boundary 2*, V21 Special Issue, October 6th 2016. <http://www.boundary2.org/2016/10/jesse-oak-taylor-anthropocene-inscriptions-reading-global-synchrony/>

⁶⁹ Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History’, pp. 198 & 201.

⁷⁰ Chakrabarty, D. ‘Anthropocene Time’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2018), p. 6.

temporal scales that measure the passage of human life (decades, years, months, weeks, days) take on a new and ominous significance. The scale of human influence is multiplied to a degree sufficient to figure on geological timescales on which the existence of human life previously seemed unlikely to register. Even so, human time still starkly contrasts with the inconceivable expanse of geological time that spans four and a half billion years. Human life, in comparison, is worked out on a scale usually less than a century in length. This temporal scale forms a measure for individual life-projects and the feasibility of their completion.

In his explication of what he calls ‘regimes of historicity’, François Hartog describes such a regime as ‘not a factual given’ capable of being ‘observed directly.’ Rather, it is ‘constructed by the historian’: ‘an artificial construct whose value lies in its heuristic potential’; ‘a formal category’ from which a particular ‘order of time’ is derived, one which ‘can elucidate our experiences of time’. Such a regime, he notes, becomes a way of ‘linking together past, present, and future, or of mixing the three categories.’ As for ‘historicity’, this he defines as the ‘human being’s self-awareness as a historical being, on his finitude, or on his openness toward the future’. The term historicity ‘essentially refers to how individuals or groups situate themselves and develop in time, that is, the forms taken by their historical condition.’ He writes of historicity as a ‘primary experience of *estrangement*, of distance between self and self, to which the categories of past, present, and future give order and meaning, enabling it to be grasped and expressed’:

Going back to Homer, one could cite the scene in which Odysseus hears his own exploits sung by the Phaeacian bard. Odysseus is suddenly confronted with his inability to link his previous identity as the glorious victor of Troy to his present one as a shipwrecked and destitute castaway who has lost everything, right down to his own name. What he lacks is

precisely the category of the past through which he could recognise himself in that other who is nonetheless himself.⁷¹

Indeed, writing in 1989, Christoph Wulf points out that ‘the way man sees the world is the way he sees himself; the way he conceives himself is the way he conceives the world. Alterations in his view of the world lead to alterations in his view of himself and vice versa.’ Time, Wulf continues, is the ‘medium that binds a man’s view of the world with his view of himself.’⁷² Thus to alter one’s view of time is to modify or otherwise affect one’s view of the world, and consequently of oneself. Yet over the centuries, he remarks, ‘an increasing gap has grown between the individual life-span and extended world-time’: the individual discovers that she occupies a different dimension of time to that of the world. As modern life accelerates, time grows short: the individual faces ‘an ever-growing shortage of time’, for ‘how can a human being, within his restricted life-span, cope with the fact that the world is expanding beyond historic time and beyond the temporality of nature into a virtual infinity, with the discrepancy between the potentiality of an individual life and the general time limits of the world becoming intolerable?’ Modern science has revealed temporal scales beyond human comprehension. Cosmic time clashes with the brevity of individual life-time. Hence the shortage of time has become ‘the fundamental condition of life itself.’⁷³

Faced with this discrepancy, time now ‘obsesses advanced societies’: ‘they have to manage it; they have to manage *with* it.’⁷⁴ To administrate and competently manage late capitalist society requires time as a ‘universal form of measurement and order’ capable of regulating the delicate social and technological infrastructure on which billions of

⁷¹ Hartog, F. *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, translated by Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. xv-xvii.

⁷² Wulf, ‘The Temporality of World-views and Self-Images’, p. 49.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁴ Davies, M. L. ‘*Fin de siècle*: On the Psychopathology of Historicized Life’ (personal correspondence), p. 1.

human lives depend.⁷⁵ History becomes humanity's time-management system *par excellence*, organising it in order to anticipate a future to which human life remains apprehensively exposed. Further, the historical management of time and the management of nature appear linked: nature can become subordinate if reduced to the time of man, which entails the domestication of nature under systems of temporal calibration.

Traditionally, 'the epochal consciousness of advancing time, *Neuzeit*, modernity', following the 'start of the clock of secular progress rather than patient waiting for the Second Coming', contains 'someone at the center – man, human, subject, individual – defining the ground of authority and hope.'⁷⁶ With the Anthropocene centralising humankind, expanding its temporal horizons, Sverre Raffnsøe observes that 'history has taken a surprising and curious turn, beginning again in a way we had initially overlooked as a possibility, and which we cannot firmly grasp or predict.'⁷⁷ Yet, as a historicization, 'the Anthropocene not only closes the Holocene epoch; it also brings to a close all preceding eons, eras, periods, epochs and ages in our planet's presumably 4.9 billion-year-long history, in the sense that the conditions hitherto applying to life on Earth are no longer valid.' In this 'opening of a new chapter in the world's history', when we step 'over the threshold into a new and unknown space in which new fundamental conditions apply', and the nature of which we cannot therefore antecedently trace, it seems nothing will remain the same, that nothing will remain as it was, that nothing will be adequately understood, least of all *historically*.⁷⁸ As Hartog remarks,

a sense of historical time is generated by the distance, and tension, between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation... the temporal structure of the modern period

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Greif, M. *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 321.

⁷⁷ Raffnsøe, S. *Philosophy of the Anthropocene: The Human Turn* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

is characterized by an asymmetry between experience and expectation that is produced by the idea of progress and the opening of time onto a future. This asymmetry grew ever more extreme from the end of the eighteenth century, as time speeded up.⁷⁹

Historically regimented, in the Anthropocene the categories of past, present, and future apparently remain bound to the same order of geohistorical time in the hope of comprehending them as a whole. Yet in failing to meaningfully unite these categories, there occurs in this ‘new chapter’ of history a stand-off between the horizon of expectation historically inherited, and the space of experience which disrupts and even dissolves it. Hence the Anthropocene, as a disjunction or crack-up in time-consciousness rather than a smooth transition to a new, coherent regime of historicity, only increases this asymmetry between experience and expectation. Now the present appears as a precursor to an unpalatable future state, one which emerges not under the command of guiding principles driving forward a comprehensible historical process, but stripped of them entirely. Appealing to the past to situate ourselves in relation to the future only confirms our occupation of a regime of historicity we are unable to disown, and which stretches out into a future trammelled by its past.

Still, ‘our sense of who we are’, David Carr asserts, ‘whether as individuals, as families, as institutions, as societies or even as nations, is very much a function of our sense of where we have come from and where we are going. This lived history, grounded in our experience, is our first and abiding awareness of the past.’⁸⁰ But if the Anthropocene merely entails the prospect of a future historically restrained by what went before, it cannot offer its occupants insights adequate to anticipate who they might alternatively become. Thanks to the injunction to historicize, where we are going is in the Anthropocene unknown except in terms of what came before; yet what came before,

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸⁰ Carr, D. *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 75.

how things got to be the way they are, is precisely what seems unable to clarify what is yet to happen. For this reason, as a world-view it undermines entirely the idea that one's 'lived history' and consequent 'awareness of the past' can remotely compensate for the apprehension living in this historicized world involves. At the very moment when it seemed that the human species had achieved lift-off, had transcended the planetary confinement of millions of years of evolution, it finds itself short-changed: regrettably, 'during a period of rapid change driven by the ideology of progress, it can turn out that the periodization of an individual's life [*Lebenszeit*] and the transcendent historical processes [*Weltzeit*] cannot be made to coincide; the horizon of experience and the horizon of expectation fail to synchronize.'⁸¹

Theoretically, 'man's views of the world and of himself can be seen as part of an attempt, if not to close the gap between the time dimensions of the individual and those of the world, at least to make it bearable. They establish a meaning to life, make the subject feel at home in the world, and help conceal from him the brutality of this temporal difference.'⁸² But the Anthropocene does none of this: rather, subverting human comprehension through its historicization of history itself, and with, therefore, 'its sense... already superseded', it exacts a punishing psychological toll caused by the realisation that 'human agency is already compromised.'⁸³ By implicitly affirming the idea that history is a natural given, that human beings are given naturally to think and know themselves historically, it maintains history as a dominant cognitive predicate, the basis for knowing anything whatsoever – despite history's self-compromising redundancy:

⁸¹ Davies, M. L. *Identity or History? Marcus Herz and the End of the Enlightenment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 145.

⁸² Wulf, 'The Temporality of World-Views and Self-Images', p. 61.

⁸³ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 137.

Predicated on a comprehensive structure of self-reference and nothing else, in a historicized world history cannot help superseding itself, preventing itself achieving its own historical identity, becoming de-synchronized within itself. Thus, even though like a fabulous department store stocked high with the most heterogeneous variety of goods, the self-referential historicized world leaves consciousness itself nothing but incriminated and isolated.⁸⁴

Historical consciousness is then in the comprehensively historicized world of the Anthropocene strikingly overdeveloped: in a world gripped by the latest thing, historically eclipsed at every turn, human beings are hyper-attuned to the merest hint of historical redundancy, obsessed with their own obsolescence which they spy, apprehensively, in the misfortunes of others. Very soon, as I write this, ‘Theresa May’s premiership will be history’: as the end draws near, thoughts immediately turn to her historical *legacy* (‘if she is remembered at all’); some months previously, as her Brexit deal ‘suffers historic defeat’ in the House of Commons, irreparable damage is declared done to her historical standing, to her place in history; as she finally resigns, her historical significance pre-empted, she is declared ‘a woman without a legacy’: ‘time itself outdid Theresa May.’⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Serena Williams is described by buoyant Wimbledon commentators as ‘chasing history’ before the commencement of the Ladies Singles Final (2019), requiring just one more Grand Slam to equal the standing record. In this instance, to ‘chase history’ conventionally implies that the individual concerned aspires to a place in the historical record through deeds of unusual or memorable significance, whether they be athletic,

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁸⁵ ‘The problem with Theresa May’s desire for a legacy’ *The Spectator*, 17th June 2019. <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2019/06/the-problem-with-theresa-mays-desire-for-a-legacy/>; ‘Theresa May suffers historic defeat in vote as Tories turn against her’, *Guardian*, 16th January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jan/15/theresa-may-suffers-historic-defeat-as-tories-turn-against-her/>; ‘Theresa May: A woman without a legacy’, *Eurasia Future*, 24th May 2019. <https://eurasiafuture.com/2019/05/24/theresa-may-a-woman-without-a-legacy/>

artistic, intellectual, military, medical, political, or architectural. Later in the commentary box, Williams's overwhelming defeat is met with shock and surprise: the history she was to have made, the record she was supposed to secure, is delayed; postponed (possibly forever) by the superior exploits of her opponent. This produces disquiet, a singular sense of unease. Yet again, expectation and reality have failed to synchronise: events seem stranded out of time, in no-man's land.

When exposed, the fragility of historicized life, the apprehension it actually induces, fractures the semblance of comprehension history supposedly supplies:

The crowd of onlookers - residents, Parisians and tourists, some hunched over bridge parapets, others standing open-mouthed or sat in shock on cafe terraces overlooking the cathedral, stayed. Many wondered how the fire could have been allowed to happen. "It's a national tragedy," said Paul Rechter, who lives in the Marais, a few hundred metres from Notre Dame. "It's a symbol of France that is collapsing there, part of our national identity going up in smoke. Part of our history, our culture, our literature ... How on earth could it have happened? Why were there no precautions?" His wife Agnes said her parents and grandparents had lived on the Île Saint-Louis and the Île de la Cité. "We have known the cathedral since our childhood," she said. "It's part of our personal history, too." She said she thought most of all of "the centuries of work, of craftsmanship, that went into that building ... The number of men who have worked on it down the years."⁸⁶

The unanticipated destruction of history unfolding in real time prompts expressions of dismay, of personal anguish: it seems incredible how precarious historicized life really is, how transient its outward signs of solidity and permanence. Tragically, historical sentience beholds the gradual antiquation of the world it apprehends, and itself along with it.

As Notre Dame exemplifies, upon perceiving its real 'cognitive inadequacy', previously masked by the coordinating categories of historical comprehension, the mind

⁸⁶ Henley, J. *The Guardian* (online) 15th April 2019 – Notre Dame Fire live news feed. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2019/apr/15/notre-dame-cathedral-fire-paris-france-landmark-live-news>

is left ‘helplessly disorientated.’⁸⁷ The very thing that makes history (change, difference, alterity, otherness) is what simultaneously frustrates our comprehension of it. For Davies, this means that historical knowledge is, in perpetuity, inadequately connected to the reality it is meant to explain. Not just inadequate but mistaken, historical sense-structures become misleading. So, burdened by a ‘historical *hyper*-consciousness’ developed ‘through history’s self-historicization’, which realises that it is ‘already pre-empted by what has recently, lately gone before’, ‘*historicized* consciousness regards the world’s arrangement as something unstable’ – not least because the world is constantly superseding the way it historically was.⁸⁸ Although the means of instituting sufficient explanations for how and why things are the way they are, in the historicized world history’s stock rises in obverse proportion to its relevance. That’s its fatal flaw: ‘that history thus keeps generating itself in a historicized world that renders it redundant’ is for Davies a symptom of ‘the psychopathology of historicized life’. But ‘the mental historicizing habit’ is ‘a dependency few can envision relinquishing’. For this reason, inflated claims about history’s ineluctable human value are attempts to ‘compensate for its demise, to outweigh its existential irrelevance’.⁸⁹

For example, tautologically, ‘consciousness of historicity’ is for Carla van Boxtel the ‘core of historical consciousness’ – i.e. ‘the understanding that things can change, but at the same time other things can stay the same, and that the world we live in is a ‘product’ of history’.⁹⁰ Conveniently, whenever consciousness reflects on its ‘historicity’, it is therefore reflecting on itself, on its humanity. Contrariwise, whenever one reflects on humanity, one resorts or appeals to its ‘historicity’ to recognise it. Thus the banality of

⁸⁷ Davies, ‘Cognitive inadequacy’, p. 338.

⁸⁸ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 24.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 155 & 43.

⁹⁰ Clark, A. & Peck, C. L. (eds.), *Contemplating Historical Consciousness - Notes from the Field* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), p. 69.

historical consciousness only ever leads back to history. Equally, the proposition that historical consciousness is ‘an awareness of the *fundamental historical character* of human behavior, knowledge, institutions, events, and developments in the world, including one’s own position’, simply affirms that history has indeed become a dominant, virtually insurmountable idea (my emphasis). Being total, and therefore inescapable, it sustains the conviction that human identity ‘is fundamentally rooted in the past’, even though ‘we can never make our historicity completely transparent to ourselves’!⁹¹ Constantly failing to establish historical synchrony, no wonder the heterogeneous profusion of historical knowledge of always indeterminate value has delivered a world of uncertain historical meaningfulness. No wonder, too, that its indeterminacy provides a useful pretext to keep producing more of it.

Notre Dame is the historicization of historical comprehension at its most unforgiving, disrupting what Davies calls ‘the recurrent trope on which identity depends’: namely, ‘the conviction of rationality, the belief in the existential security afforded by symbolic structures and rational taxonomies.’⁹² Yet the totally historicized world is one in which the deficiencies of the latter are doomed to be historically confirmed, their efficacy constantly questioned before being binned entirely. Here, existence takes shape only in the wake of loss – is defined and dissolved by it.

Clearly, as Baudrillard puts it, our existential dilemma has ‘become one of waste’, especially the historical waste of bygone eras:

It is not just material substances, including nuclear ones, which pose a waste problem but also the defunct ideologies, bygone utopias, dead concepts and fossilised ideas which continue to pollute our mental space. Historical and intellectual refuse pose an even more

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 225 & 220.

⁹² Davies, M. L. *Identity or History? Marcus Herz and the End of the Enlightenment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 218.

serious problem than industrial waste. Who will rid us of the sedimentation of centuries of stupidity?⁹³

Subsequently, the current crisis marks the point at which one's system of reality – that is, one's set of conceptions, assumptions, habits, tastes and so forth – are brought abruptly into question. These are being both quietly and violently displaced; discredited by events that follow one upon another with dependable irregularity. Transfixed by events both haphazard and unforeseen, this precarious modern life – 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent', as Baudelaire puts it – inflicts its uncertainties and interrupts the flow of time. Into what future we are being hurled with such velocity we cannot easily imagine. Our means of comprehending ourselves are growing old: incompatible with the conditions life throws up, they yield not assurance but anxiety. As Paul Valéry says:

We live in a critical age, that is to say an age in which a number of incompatible things are found together... all the notions we thought solid, all the values of civilized life, all that made for stability in international relations, all that made for regularity in the economy... in a word, all that tended happily to limit the uncertainty of the morrow, all that gave to nations and individuals some confidence in the morrow... all this seems badly compromised.⁹⁴

Ecological catastrophe, economic inequity, military conflict, and political upheaval conspire to expose a world that doesn't work as it is historically supposed to; that no longer conforms to the historical coordinates by which previous generations navigated; and that therefore no longer follows any identifiable 'pattern' or 'course' since 'in locating Hell above ground, we have passed out of the major order and symmetries of Western civilization'.⁹⁵

⁹³ Baudrillard, J. *The Illusion of the End*, translated by Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 26.

⁹⁴ Valéry, P. 'Historical Fact', in *The Outlook for Intelligence*, edited by Jackson Mathews (Bollingen Series XLV & Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 127-28.

⁹⁵ Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 48.

As much as any other term, then, the Anthropocene encapsulates, or at least signals, our sense of history today, which is overwhelmingly one of deliquescence: of a rapid, destructive movement leaving colossal quantities of history behind, caught in a world accelerating beyond the orientating narratives and concepts inherited from the past. Trapped, here, between deliquescence and redundancy, our sense of history now yields a dual mixture of catastrophism, on the one hand, and self-adulation on the other. To marvel at human achievement – which has for instance delivered longer, healthier lives – is at once to recognise its fragility, to realise it is under threat.

To conceive of the historical contingency of all things and yet acknowledge the connection between ourselves and our environment, in which we are prisoners of historical ‘forces’ beyond our control, and which our predecessors unleashed, is a predicament which only amplifies our incurable sense of crisis: its signs, its symptoms, its constant and tragic awareness of self-sabotage. It turns the confrontation with anthropogenic change into a constant confrontation with history, eliciting a sense of crisis that is nothing less than a crisis in historical sense, a destabilisation of historical comprehension. Once, historical comprehension seemed ideally capable of attaining in abstract a cosmic view of human history, engendering a sense of being at one with the world, attuned most intimately with its ways; surveying its course, its progress, its plan, its destiny. Today, the crisis of historical comprehension is a consequence of the self-induced breakdown in that symmetry or congruence between thought and being, between individual life-time and the time of the world, that historical knowledge was supposed to confirm or provide. That knowledge now proves inadequate because there can be no symmetry or alignment between two points of instability: the human mind, on the one hand, and the world it creates on the other, both of which reciprocally reshape each other in unexpected and often unwelcome ways.

There is still, of course, an idea of historical sense as an aspiration orientating the academic discipline, both driving and justifying the knowledge it produces. If the attainment of historical sense were considered impossible, there would be no point in writing history. That the discipline has the capacity to produce historical sense, to insinuate the existence of historical meaning no matter what, is testament to the utility of its conceptual apparatus, and the existential authority the historicized mind affords it. Efficiently wielding a range of categorical coordinators, historians are able to represent the history of anything with ease. But the success of history in its disciplinary mode is disconnected from the lack of sense history makes overall. The word 'sense' in relation to our awareness of history in our everyday lives suggests something altogether more ominous, more elusive, less amenable to analysis, less easily verified according to any established standard.

The proliferation of histories, the ingestion of more and more historical knowledge, actually proves unable to assuage the trepidation about life as it has historically turned out – instead, they amplify and confirm its loss of meaning. In the already historicized world, where everything is turned into an object of historical scrutiny, where everything is provided with a historical account of how it came to be the way it is, every element of our lives is turned into a passing expression of an incomprehensibly *larger* history which has yet to be worked out, and whose implications remain unknown. Each worldly object, each fleeting occurrence, is apparent confirmation of something meaningful in history only more historical knowledge can allegedly disclose – if only it knew what it was. Here, asking about the sense of history in a world already beholden to it, already possessed by it, is like asking the inebriate to reflect dispassionately on their relationship to alcohol. Trapped in a vicious cycle of dependence, their only recourse is to reach, yet again, for the toxic substance: for the thing that both does and doesn't make sense.

In this regard, how depressing it is to observe the world history has made, to be invited to investigate and relive, again and again, how things historically happened. The extraordinary cruelty, the criminality, the corruption, and the incompetence of it inspires bewilderment. As Dorian Gray, the literary embodiment of moral and aesthetic decay, looks ‘back upon man moving through History’, as Wilde puts it, he is at once ‘haunted by a feeling of loss.’⁹⁶ The overreach, the grasping, insatiable scheming in human action is revealed in an unending succession of occurrences whose narrative conjunction yields no respite: the why’s and how’s of history are invariably answered too late, confirming only a world of uncertain meaningfulness. How tiresome this acquaintance with insanity, how tedious the confrontation with failure!

But this is part of the price of historicized consciousness, of constant historical recapitulation. It results in a feeling of wastefulness and regret constantly confirmed in the squandered, the squalid, the superfluous, and the stupid in human history. ‘Just as life supplanted nothingness’, Cioran remarks, ‘life in its turn was supplanted by history.’⁹⁷ There is something disquieting about this remark today: its sentiment resonates in the resounding silence of once teeming oceans, is revealed in the barren soil, in the polluted air, in the absence of extinct species. History is already here, waylaying its unsuspecting inhabitants.

Unsurprisingly, then, one needs to turn to literary fiction – not the self-interested exponents of historical enquiry – to gain an accurate representation of the disillusionment of history, and which comes out particularly forcefully in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*:

The whacks, the moans, the cracks, the groans, the welts, the squeaks, the belts, the shrieks, the pricks, the prayers, the kicks, the tears, the skelps, and the yelps. And the poor old lousy old earth, my earth and my father’s and my mother’s and my father’s father’s and

⁹⁶ Wilde, O. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), p. 95.

⁹⁷ Cioran, E. M. *A Short History of Decay*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 153.

my mother's mother's and my father's mother's and my mother's father's, and my father's mother's father's and my mother's father's mother's and my father's mother's mother's and my mother's father's father's and my father's father's mother's and my mother's mother's father's and my father's father's father's and my mother's mother's mother's and other people's fathers' and mothers' and fathers' fathers' and mothers' mothers' and fathers' mothers' and mothers' fathers' and fathers' mothers' fathers' and mothers' fathers' mothers' and fathers' mothers' mothers' and mothers' fathers' fathers' and fathers' fathers' mothers' and mothers' mothers' father's and fathers' fathers' fathers' and mothers' mothers' mothers'. An excrement.⁹⁸

Fuelled by an uncompromising awareness of existential futility, the banality, the increasing obscurity of this sequence descends into a temporal void: a perfect negative.

A different effect, highlighting the treacherousness of historical knowledge itself, is achieved if one substitutes the term 'History' for 'God' in Cioran's bitter reflections on the fickleness of religious piety:

I am in a good mood: [History] is good; I am sullen: [It] is wicked; I am indifferent: [It] is neutral. My states confer upon [History] corresponding attributes: when I love knowledge, [History] is omniscient, and when I worship power, omnipotent. When things seem to me to exist, [History] exists; when they seem illusory, [It] evaporates. A thousand arguments sustain [History], and a thousand destroy... We cannot form a more variable image: we fear [History] as a monster and crush [It] like a worm; we idolize [It]: [History] is Being; repel [History]: [it] is Nothingness.⁹⁹

Evidently, the sense of history is capricious: its capacity to satisfy the mind's need for meaning is inherently unstable, fluctuating on the merest whim or flight of fancy. Only ever as coherent as people imagine, it contains an incompatible array of anachronistic 'answers'; a latent and unavoidable ability to generate dead-ends and deceptions.

Clearly, faith in history increases in inverse proportion to its intelligibility. The less rational and orderly historical events appear, the more they mutate beyond the bounds of

⁹⁸ Beckett, *S. Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pp. 46-47.

⁹⁹ Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, p. 142.

human anticipation, and the less historical precedents have any purchase on what happens, the more the intellect strives – and fails – to comprehend them. Still, the point of historical knowledge, explanation, narrative, is indeed to make historical events make sense, even to ‘teach’ us ‘lessons’. And on the face of it, make sense it certainly can. The trouble is, it always arrives afterwards. Unfortunately, nobody now knows how much sense historians eventually might make of our present, ghastly circumstances. All we know is that the knowledge historical enquiry might derive from the benefit of hindsight is withheld from us. So, what we have, all we ever have, is the knowledge we possess now. Those historical ‘precedents’ capable, allegedly, of guiding contemporary behaviour (*historia magistra vitae est*) are inherently unreliable – they pertain to situations long absent, occasions whose relevance has long expired. Hence whatever future insights about our situation might one day become available, they can certainly do nothing for us now. That, indeed, is the futility and frustration of our belated historical comprehension: it is our fate to know things that might have helped those preceding us, now sadly far beyond our assistance. Likewise, people in the future may in retrospect know things that might have helped amend our contemporary predicament, if only they had any means of communicating them...

The Anthropocene: ‘the age of the finite world’

Levinas finds in the world ‘a crisis of human freedom, power, and knowledge, a reversal of technological power into enslavement’. He asks: ‘has not the world completed by knowledge, where in the final account novelty only stands out as a menace, grown old in this heavy *fin-de-siècle* consciousness?’¹⁰⁰ This ‘completed’, anthropomorphised world, conquered by knowledge, in which nothing can be resisted, evaded, or hidden, where

¹⁰⁰ Levinas, E. ‘The Old and the New’, translated by Cohen, R. A., in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 128. pp. 121-38.

everything has been recorded, relayed, and reflected upon, records its final results in the Anthropocene. Here, says Valéry, our species has ‘come to recognise the shape of the earth’s surface, has visited and depicted its parts more accurately, guessed at and verified its closed convexity, found and summed up the laws of its movement, discovered, appraised, exploited the resources and usable reserves of that thin layer in which all life is contained...’ This completed world is, paradoxically, a ‘finite world’: a world extraordinarily depleted, apportioned, and sold-out.¹⁰¹ A world which has been finally concluded.

In its most fundamental ‘essence’, then, the Anthropocene signifies the movement of entire swathes of planetary material transformed into capital: the machine forcibly conscripts material to maintain the careering momentum of modern life to its bitter end. Carbon intensive techniques reallocate matter across the globe in order to satiate the billions accustomed to a variety of foodstuffs all year round. The whole planet has been enlisted in our service, by which I mean the extraction and manipulation of raw materials, by hand and machine, and all this entails: the burning, drilling, draining, dragging, chopping, crushing, cracking, mulching, mashing; the vast upheavals of rock and soil, water and vegetation; the removal of waste through throwing, tossing, trashing, and discarding. No wonder, as Arendt says, ‘man began to consider himself part and parcel of the two superhuman, all-encompassing processes of nature and history’, and to have now, through the Anthropocene, dissolved the distinction between them.¹⁰²

Such a world seems from this geohistorical perspective to have turned the possible into the actual; to have concluded from its actuality its rationality; and from its rationality its humanity. Indeed, naturalism as an intellectual tradition, Allott points out, does find

¹⁰¹ Valéry, P. *The Outlook for Intelligence*, Volume 10 from Bollingen Series XLV, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, edited by Matthews, J. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 13-15.

¹⁰² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 307.

the rational in the actual: ‘human beings, on this view, become a sort of back-formation from the actual. The actual is prior to the human.’ Now in the Anthropocene, however, the human and the actual converge: all actualities are human; can only derive from the human. And what human beings create, being actualities, become necessities. Accordingly, we ‘attribute an equal measure of reality to all human creations’, and the ‘necessity flowing from actuality has the effect of dignifying all human creations’: ‘a salute, a religion, a royal palace, an epic poem, a national anthem, a law, a life of self-sacrifice, a surgical operation, a death in battle, the burning of a witch, a nuclear weapon, the genocide of a people, world war, global warming. They are all actualisations of the human mind. They are all equally actual.’¹⁰³

The consequence of this is that ‘humanity has become passive in relation to its own creations’: in this ‘normativity of the actual’, our creations are treated ‘as autonomous sources of energy and significance.’ And yet, even so,

Humanity did not choose to work in systems of mass production, to travel over land and through the air at ever greater speeds, to fill the mind with images electronically generated on screens of various kinds, to prolong lives and alter states of mind by the use of chemical compounds, to murder human beings by the million and destroy whole cities by the use of ever more ingenious weapons. The supply of such things created a demand, and the demand co-operated by rationalising and optimising their use.

So now, there is ‘no way of knowing what another human world might have been’, one less in thrall to the creations enabled by natural science.¹⁰⁴

This, then, is our inheritance, the ‘unprecedented and unbearable legacy’ of human actualisation on a planetary scale.¹⁰⁵ Existing on our authority, the reign of human actualities makes the Anthropocene our ‘syndrome of total accomplishment’: its

¹⁰³ Allott, P. *The Health of Nations: Society and Law Beyond the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 104.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

necessity, its unimpeachability, the consequence of aligning the rational with the actual, of human history with natural history.¹⁰⁶ The tautological authority of this ‘great culminating moment in history’, as Hegel envisioned, finally derives from ‘the history of the world which is the world’s court of judgement.’¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, with its inhabitants knowing it need not have turned out this way, that things might have been different, history remorselessly hands down its verdict of destitute uncertainty, of disappointed apprehension.

The ultimate tragedy of this, our hyper-historical world, rendered thoroughly historicized in the Anthropocene, is that we can no longer distinguish history from reality, or reality from history: they seem one and the same thing. No wonder Canetti laments the requirement to peer apprehensively at a world that has endured too much, and whose history testifies to its failure. ‘I would give a great deal to get rid of my habit of seeing the world historically. How wretched is this division by years and its transfer to the life of animals and plants, when they were not yet burdened by us. The Crown of human tyranny is the counting of years; the most oppressive of all legends is the story of the creation of the world for us.’¹⁰⁸ Here, Arendt observes, ‘reality falls directly upon Man as altogether incalculable, unthinkable and unforeseen... Reality shows itself as something that cannot be evaded, cannot be resolved by thought.’¹⁰⁹ But this reality is, paradoxically, in the Anthropocene *man’s own reality*; his own world, as Vico earlier asserted, ‘of measurable quantities’ to which he is solitarily confined. Yet in needing to escape the danger of this reality, to finally leave it behind, he finds his own world has

¹⁰⁶ Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid; Hegel, G. W. F. *Philosophy of Right*, translated by Knox. T. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 216.

¹⁰⁸ Canetti, E. *The Human Province* (London: Pan Books, 1986), p. 123.

¹⁰⁹ Arendt, H. ‘What is Existenz Philosophy?’, in Moran, D. & Mooney, T. (eds.) *The Phenomenology Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 348.

betrayed him, since its history cannot offer him knowledge sufficient to escape from himself...

Thwarted, confronted with a world displaced, constantly torn away from what it was, the historicized mind tries to re-establish some form of congruence between the objects of experience and experience itself, little realising that the historical identity it craves is compromised by its own historical self-comprehension. Yet after discovering the limits of both human and historical comprehension on a scale never before experienced, whereupon the anachronistic nature of historical understanding is fatally exposed, it can only opt to historicize itself yet again; to consign its outmoded forms of self-understanding to the dustbin of history. Only to find, alarmingly, that '*History itself has become a dustbin*. It has become its own dustbin. Just as the planet is becoming its own dustbin.' The Anthropocene's amplified redundancy, in a cruel twist, perversely ensures that 'nothing one thought superseded by history has really disappeared.'¹¹⁰ It must, as Latour earlier insisted, be constantly recycled, re-examined, re-used. Unfortunately, here in the Anthropocene, Canetti observes regretfully, 'men will not find any more unknown objects. They will have to make them. How dismal!'¹¹¹

To this extent, the Anthropocene discloses a mausoleum inhabited by the living dead. The desire to document its origins, to chart its decline, to speculate as to its future condition, summons the image of the mortician musing over the still animate corpse – an oxymoron strangely suited to our age. Already, the ambition to present a 'pre-emptive history of the Anthropocene and its meanings' was revealed in a recent volume entitled *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*.¹¹² Through their itemised histories, the collection is intended to illustrate one of the defining features of

¹¹⁰ Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p. 26.

¹¹¹ Canetti, *The Human Province*, p. 25.

¹¹² 'A History of the Anthropocene in Objects', *Edge Effects* Webpage, May 22nd 2018. Accessed 24th October 2018. <http://edgeeffects.net/future-remains-anthropocene-object-photography>

this purported epoch: the inextricable entwinement of its objects, whose interactions inaugurate an environment in which the fate of human and natural history are interlinked. It hopes to imagine its trajectory into the far future through reference to the history of mundane objects (or perhaps more fittingly, *memento mori*), whose conjunction produces the cumulative intensity of its lethal effects. This mutual modification of matter that characterises the Anthropocene entails, instead of its triumphal detachment from nature, the gradual subsumption of the human artifice: its incremental incorporation into history.

Conclusion: ‘*The Mind at the End of its Tether*’

The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace...

Ezra Pound, ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’.

In the Anthropocene, human beings ultimately confront an enduring mismatch between historical comprehension and the circumstances of immediate existence. As Schopenhauer points out, ‘history shows us mankind just as a view from a high mountain shows us nature. We see a great deal at a time, wide stretches, great masses, but nothing is distinct or recognisable according to the whole of its real nature.’¹ In this sense, the melancholy title of H. G. Wells’ final book is apposite to the multidimensional, interconnected malady of our times, in which ecological, political, and personal grievance converge. In this perspicacious volume, approaching the last months of his life, Wells contemplates a world refracted through pain, through the prism of mental anguish. Unsparingly, he records his apprehensions of impending doom for the consideration of his readers, anticipating their refusal to accept what he calls ‘the ultimate disaster that confronts our species.’² Trapped in what he perceives as ‘a jaded world devoid of recuperative power’, confronting the ‘universal inadequacy’ of human life, his former confidence in the ability of man to ‘pull out of his entanglements to start a new creative phase of human living’ collapses into ‘stoical cynicism’.³ Expressing a now familiar anxiety, the ‘internecine struggle for existence’ that characterises life on a finite planet now ‘inaugurates a fresh phase in the evolving story of Being’; after surveying ‘the whole

¹ Schopenhauer, A. *The World as Will and Representation Vol. I*, translated by Payne, E. F. J. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. 248.

² Wells, H. G. ‘The Mind at the End of its Tether’, in *The Last Books of H. G. Wells* (New York: Provenance Editions, 2006), p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

three thousand million years of Organic Evolution’, we behold the unedifying spectacle, in the case of our own species, ‘of beings over-running their means of subsistence’: as succinct a summary of our present, misguided circumstances as one could wish for.⁴ His optimism duly curtailed, a noticeable slippage between the personal and the universal emerges, signalling a state of heightened psychological agitation. Frequently, he rambles incoherently, projecting his own, discrete transition towards oblivion upon a world set soon to end, somewhat self-centredly, in conjunction with his own.

Doubtless, the death of oneself does entail the end of the world as one subjectively knew it: the cessation of that contingent, corporeal collocation of experiences, expectations, memories, desires, triumphs, and disappointments we call a person. Thus, understandably, the nearer Wells’ acquaintance with death, the severer his sense of futility – the deeper his abyss of despair. Yet what emerges in *The Mind at the End of its Tether* (1946) is no simple misconception or solipsistic category mistake – the confusion of part with whole, the conflation of self and world – but a diagnosis of disturbing honesty, of significant existential insight.

Locating and interrogating what can only be described as a devastating schism between mind and world, Wells elaborates upon what he calls ‘a fundamental change’ in the conditions of existence, whereby ‘the movement of events is increasingly adverse to the mental make-up of our everyday life.’⁵ Where once the ‘everyday foreground of our thoughts’ was ‘sufficiently vivid to outshine any sustained intellectual persuasion of accumulating specific disaster’, ‘hard fact’ now ‘runs away from analysis and does not return’, ‘outpacing any standard hitherto accepted.’⁶ Forced, frustratingly, to live ‘in reference to past experience’, the mind succumbs to the realisation that increasingly, ‘the

⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 44 & 47.

significance of Mind fades': its purchase on what it once perceived to be the normal course of events declines, as 'the secular process [history] loses its accustomed appearance of a mental order.'⁷ Rather, events are divorced from expectation, following one another 'in an entirely untrustworthy sequence. No-one knows what to-morrow will bring forth.'⁸ Hence, crucially, 'he has come to believe that that congruence with mind, which man has attributed to the secular process, is not really there at all.'⁹ Behind the appearance of historical synchrony looms a fundamental discord between the mind and the world it apprehends. Recoiling, human identity detaches from history and is thrown abruptly off course: both diverge from a common destiny once attributed to them, from any binding, inextricable trajectory. Yet still, distressingly, the fortunes of the one remain bound to the fortunes of the other.

In his previously positive state of mind, Wells muses nostalgically, 'critical anticipation' made him enquire of everything: "To what will this lead?", for:

It was natural for him to assume that there was a limit set to change, that new things and events would appear, but that they would appear consistently, preserving the natural sequence of life. So that in the present vast confusion of our world, there was always the assumption of an ultimate restoration of rationality, and adaptation and a resumption. It was merely a question, the fascinating question, of what forms the new rational phase would assume...¹⁰

But, instead of any discernible historical process unfolding in parallel with the mind's appraisal of it (one that would maintain the old conviction of some deep, elemental compatibility between mind and world, an existential concord disclosed in the ineluctable identity of thought and being), now worldly events seem incongruent with mind entirely,

⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

rendering it incapable of spying or sketching out any ‘Pattern of Things to Come’; left with no choice but to ‘carry on in this ever contracting NOW of our daily lives.’¹¹ No wonder these words resonate from a distance of more than seventy years: in exceeding planetary ecological boundaries at every level (loss of biodiversity, stratospheric ozone depletion, terrestrial and atmospheric chemical pollution, growing ocean acidification, etc¹²), capitalistic production/consumption patterns threaten the integrity of our common biosphere, eroding the capacity to share it equitably either with other species or between ourselves. Indeed, such habits of ordinary behaviour we possess leave less and less of anything of value to share.

Void, therefore, of harmony, of any meaningful historical momentum or overarching purpose, ‘a harsh queerness is coming over things’, Wells observes despondently, as ‘we pass into the harsh glare of hitherto incredible novelty. It beats the searching imagination. The more it strives the less it grasps. The more strenuous the analysis, the greater the sense of mental defeat.’¹³ In its discomfiture, burdened by its dissatisfaction with mere pretence, the ‘sceptical mind’ grasps that ‘the world of our everyday reality is no more than a more or less entertaining or distressful story thrown upon a cinema screen.’¹⁴

Subsequently, its futility harshly exposed, ‘our world of self-delusion’, Wells claims, cannot recover: it will ‘perish amidst its evasions and fatuities. It is like a convoy lost in darkness on an unknown rocky coast, with quarrelling pirates in the chartroom.’¹⁵ How familiar, in particular, seems this allusion to political incompetence, to blatant mendacity, as ‘blind obedience to egotistical leaders, fanatical persecutions, panics, hysterical

¹¹ Ibid., p. 45-46.

¹² ‘The nine planetary boundaries’, Stockholm Resilience Centre Webpage. Accessed December 1st 2018. <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

¹³ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

violence and cruelty' become our daily lot, unable to either endure or evade our constant betrayal by power wielded in its own interests.¹⁶ Faced with a world of unprecedented change, the powers that be vie to stay on a historical course long since lost; locked in a story so stultifying they lack the ability to decipher a 'way out or round or through the impasse.'¹⁷ The clanging conclusion reverberates in the gaping existential schism: 'the attempt to trace a pattern of any sort is absolutely futile.'¹⁸ Waiting in happier times expectantly, yet ultimately in vain, Wells' hope has been borne away at ever greater velocity by events without rhyme or reason, by a world that supersedes what it once was, and with it all that it once expected to be. Rather, the epitaph of human history, its recorded testament, is fleetingly inscribed on 'the fabric of being'; its loves, hates, 'wars and battles' as 'insubstantial as a dream' – before passing away forever.¹⁹

Once, it seemed as though any temporal discontinuity that appeared to exist between past, present, and future was merely a matter of insufficient insight into the 'principles of plenitude and continuity' which make 'everything in some sort lead to everything else.'²⁰ The happy marriage between mind and history was predicated on the existence of a 'Great Chain of Being' that seemed certain to endure, so long as history (the course of human events played out over time) was deemed rational, and thus what it produced legitimately constitutive of human existence. So, reasonably enough, 'Man's mind accepted the secular process as rational and it could not do otherwise, because he was evolved as part and parcel of it.'²¹ However, the rationality of this alleged 'process' could only be postulated – let alone adequately conceptualised – on the presumption of a certain

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 53

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

²⁰ Lovejoy, A. O. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 332; Newman, J. H. *The Idea of a University* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1873), 137.

²¹ Wells, p. 44.

‘logical consistency’ in the course of events themselves; hence these were made subject to a limit that would ensure their ‘course’ remained amenable to rational enquiry: enquiry that would reflect back upon the mind the pattern of its own, upwards development. That ‘limit’ was dictated by the limits of human comprehension, beyond which events could not be adequately known. Still, to preserve its sense of identity, bolstered by its boundless conceit, the mind could conspire to portray events as rational in its own self-interest, to guarantee itself a leading part in a world-historical ‘process’ favourable to its self-contentment. After all, to suggest a systematic ‘course’ or ‘process’ in history is to imply a direction immanent to the causal sequence, known either in advance or upon completion by privileged participants in its construction.

But this wishful thinking is now to no avail. As Wells points out, intellectual investigation, overwhelmed by previously inconceivable technological developments that swiftly surpass the artificial ‘limits’ (e.g. narratives, stories) imposed upon them by the human mind, discloses no sweeping, directional view of things to come, no progressive rational discernible in human affairs, no cohesion in the incorrigible chaos of human history, but rather a shattering inconsistency between mind and universe. Actually, the human ego trumpets faintly in a void, spinning aimlessly into the ‘vortex of extinction.’²² Dashed is the hope, as Thomas Carlyle saw it, of the man who, living ‘between two eternities, and warring against Oblivion’, ‘would fain unite himself in clear conscious relation, as in dim unconscious relation he is already united, with the whole Future and the whole Past.’²³ No such unity is to be found (or rationally desired) in political and ecological circumstances amenable to oblivion itself, now far beyond the reach of reason’s antiquated yard-stick, or the beguiling stories of human progress that

²² Ibid., p. 47.

²³ Carlyle, ‘On History’, p. 177.

once vouchsafed human happiness. Rather, the desperate employment of mind to distinguish its place in the world unravels in antagonism and antipathy to the world itself – or at least the present iteration of it. Wracked by mishapenstance, the mind typically imagines a return to a tranquil past free of such anxieties and misfortunes as exist now, so memorably expressed by Housman:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.²⁴

Rather like a child who discovers mortality, that most irreconcilable of disjunctions, and the rapid shortening of days upon their development into adulthood, the mind experiences an awareness of discontinuity in history that confirms its own sense of entropy – of an encroaching epilogue in which one is increasingly spoken of in historical terms (as frequently experienced by the terminally ill). The self as a contingent conjuncture of random mutation and natural selection, a lonely outpost perched on the edge of infinity, sees its abhorrent decline mirrored in the misfortunes of the world around it. In response, at the limits of its mental endurance, it pre-empts – as Wells does – the end of its source of pain. It forecloses on the world entirely.

In a wider, existential sense, this world washed-up on the shores of human perception – like a decrepit wreck of which nothing more is expected – causes an alteration in our sense of time to the extent that wholesale extinction (that is, the temporal exhaustion of

²⁴ Housman, A. E. *A Shropshire Lad* (New York: Bodley Head, 1906), p. 57.

our species) becomes a possibility raised to a level of consciousness that previously only intermittently occurred. For ‘our time, in fact’, notes Ortega y Gasset, ‘no longer regards itself as definitive; on the contrary, it discovers, though obscurely, deep within itself an intuition that there are no such epochs, definitive, assured, crystallised for ever.’ This, perhaps, is what it means to be disorientated: to be perched precariously on the rocky outcrop of a lonely shore, while wave after wave crashes into you, preventing your safe embarkation upon level sand. This sensation, signalling the apprehension of one’s historicized, provisional existence, Ortega describes in positive terms as liberatory, like escaping from a ‘hermetically sealed enclosure’. Instead of stuck ‘on a road identical to the one already under our feet’, trapped in a world where things happen as they have always happened, we are in actuality sequestered in what he calls ‘the world of reality, the world of the profound, the terrible, the unforeseeable, the inexhaustible, where everything is possible.’²⁵ Happily, he says, we now know that tomorrow is not going to be ‘in all essentials similar to today’; that ‘nowadays we no longer know what is going to happen to-morrow in our world’. But this historical disunity does not, contrary to Ortega’s claim, seem to bring us any ‘secret joy’. It is even less clear that it ought to. Rather, ‘the impossibility of foresight’, while appearing to confirm a ‘horizon ever open to all contingencies’, leaves us longing for a final destination. Negatively, it assures us of our temporal inadequacies, of our constantly wasted time.²⁶ It intensifies the feeling of loss integral to historicized life, of the foreclosure of possibilities constitutive of existence in a constantly self-historicizing world.

Yet the historicized world, Davies reiterates, ‘is a world in which whole periods of history have been historically superseded’; hence, constantly eliminating historical

²⁵ Ortega y Gasset, J. *The Revolt of the Masses*, anonymous translation (New York & London: Norton, 1964), p. 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

precedents, ‘it goes without them.’²⁷ Forced to relinquish with enormous reluctance a vast historical inheritance rendered suddenly redundant, the consequent historicization of history results in a sense of foreboding: e.g. *The Economist* complains that ‘as history’s chariot thunders at a furious pace’, as ‘the country navigates a historic period, it is losing its skill at interpreting the past’; apparently oblivious to the fact that history, once a preserve of actionable knowledge, can in circumstances mutating beyond comprehension only provide knowledge disproportionate to our present times.²⁸ Unfortunately for the advocates of historical study as a humanistic discipline, historical knowledge can’t help being insufficiently connected to the conditions it seeks to make sense of – not least because it is constantly overtaken by historically unprecedented events. No wonder, having superseded it entirely, the past no longer provides in retrospect the understanding traditionally expected of it. Here in the historicized world, an unmistakable ‘sense of destitution’ now reigns, as, ‘overwhelmed by what happens, history as comprehensive knowledge becomes redundant’: ‘the intensity of change exceeds historical comprehension’ so that, ‘exceeding – and so invalidating – historical norms, human potential precludes its historical self-comprehension.’²⁹

Hence to live a historicized life is to be ceaselessly forced to confront capitalism’s latest thing before bidding farewell to it, like so much historical junk. And while historical circumstances mutate beyond recognition, we still wade through the clapped-out detritus to see what can be salvaged, to see what in history can be used in the service of human self-comprehension. This retrogressive reflex to pick over the past even as it becomes ever more unlike the present confirms the psychopathological element in

²⁷ Davies, M. L. ‘Cognitive inadequacy: history and the technocratic management of the historicized world’, in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2016), p. 337.

²⁸ ‘The study of History is in decline in Britain’, *The Economist* webpage, 18th July 2019. <https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/07/18/the-study-of-history-is-in-decline-in-britain>

²⁹ Davies, *How History Works*, pp. 141-42.

historicized cognition. The visceral apprehension of this element is exemplified by Wells in *The Mind at the End of its Tether*. In the vertiginous, nauseating collapse of historical understanding, in its invalidation by the actual circumstances of historicized life, Wells finally realises the lack of coincidence between the world and his historical comprehension of it. Faced with the supersession of historical comprehension itself, he is left with no choice but to part ways not just from previous history, but also, *contra* Cicero, from historical comprehension as an indispensable guide to life.

This is symptomatic, says Davies, of the ‘illusory character of historical comprehension’, which is harshly exposed upon the culmination of ‘2000 years of history’. While styling historical knowledge ‘as life-enhancing’, historicized life has in reality produced ‘a pure culture of the death-drive – fatality expertly engineered.’³⁰ Tragically, contrary to the pronouncements of its countless cheerleaders down the ages, constant historical comprehension has to show for itself only a world in which the use of history to orientate human life, to achieve human self-understanding, has become a liability, a block to human flourishing or self-determination. Instead, it has resulted in a world ‘chaotic and unprecedented.’³¹ As Eugene Thacker notes, in this ‘unthinkable’ world ‘of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction’, all perpetuated through the self-destructive, historicizing effect of globalised capitalism, the mind finds no evidence of historical sense whatsoever.³²

It seems, then, that historical comprehension is undergoing an unprecedented crisis. Climatic crisis – and the planetary depletion of resources to fuel it – shatters the humanistic hope of progress. Instinctively, the mind recoils from a world it recognises

³⁰ Davies, ‘Cognitive inadequacy’, pp. 337-38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³² Thacker, E. *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Zero Books, 2011), p. 1.

less and less, but to which it remains tethered. Frenetically, it makes more and more history to escape from a situation for which it was never prepared. It searches for remedies to offset its unintended consequences. Hence the cosmic expansion of the human species is proffered by techno-enthusiasts as a viable and necessary undertaking if we are to avoid eventual extinction. Even the human body, as transhumanist proponents of the ‘singularity’ claim, is no longer an adequate or reliable receptacle for human intelligence, ridden as it is by disease, deformity, and eventually death. The need to escape from an increasingly inhospitable planetary environment frequently figures as the subject of literary fiction, films, and television series. These intellectual and cultural tendencies speak to the feeling – as well as to the ecological and climatic evidence – of historical insecurity, of historical *desynchronisation*, as this arrangement of worldly affairs already looks to supersede itself, to outpace its fatal effects.

In this, our perennial quandary, Wells’ image of the mind at the end of its tether operates as a metaphor illustrative of the psychopathology of our current condition; leashed to history, ‘tethered’ by it, confounded by it, yet unable to avoid returning, again and again, to the same redundant source. In vain we strain to see beyond the horizon of an utterly historicized world enveloped in its accumulated material and ideational detritus. In its historicizing, *immortalising* character, the Anthropocene hence amplifies the mind’s apprehension of what Adorno calls its irreparably ‘damaged life’, endlessly frustrated at the haphazard hands of history. Its anxiety it would seek to alleviate, tragically, through a technology (historical knowledge) both inadequate and self-compromising, since this can only result in ‘abject self-abnegation into the historicizing flux, into whatever is going’; where whatever is going is, in some sense, already gone.³³ Subsequently, we recede into obscurity as the comprehensive scale of this historical

³³ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 143.

category precludes its evasion by dissenting occupants. The human mind is forced, unwillingly, to identify itself with the augmented impoverishment of its epoch, to collude in its desolate imprisonment. Despite the hubris of retrofitting humanity to inhabit a hostile environment and start anew in order to escape itself, no wonder Elon Musk hopes to colonise Mars, to eject himself from this human cage of identity: to lift at last the oppressive shroud of history.

It may be that the Anthropocene is never formally ratified as a geological epoch. But the widespread use and acceptance of this term prior to its scientific induction into the lexicon of formal scientific conceptions is suggestive of a pre-emptive departure to a place of unknown proportions, which, being novel, cannot actually be known. We find ourselves in a situation that seems simultaneously to be exiting the scene. Like Nietzsche's 'Last Men' who, existing at the end of history, 'know everything that has ever happened', we find ourselves strangely destitute.³⁴ History's indifference is matched only by that of the planet. In historical terms, we have become uneasy interlopers in our own home, waiting for a notice of eviction. Yet with our fate historically pre-empted, it becomes our fate to never leave. A disillusioned species, observing itself decline into the past, is left to reflect at length on how its world might have been, yet can no longer be; being how it now is, how it oughtn't to be.

This prompts an apprehensive misgiving already extant in the non-negatable void haunting the historicized world. That is, 'if history does not ultimately make sense, what sense is there in anything?'³⁵ Certainly, thanks to the industry of historical knowledge, 'people seek the meaning of history and they find it'. But, as Shestov also remarks, 'why must history have a meaning? This question is never raised. And yet if someone raised

³⁴ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 47.

³⁵ Davies, *How History Works*, p. 78.

it, he would begin, perhaps, by doubting that history must have a meaning, then continue by becoming convinced that history is not at all called to have a meaning, that history is one thing and meaning another.³⁶

This proposition – that history is to be differentiated from meaning, is perhaps even divorced from meaning – seems in the historicized world a patent absurdity. It's contrary to the underlying conviction, expressed through the Anthropocene conception, that the 'World-as-Nature' has become what Spengler calls the 'World-as-History'.³⁷ Yet evidently, the Anthropocene is one thing and individual consciousness quite another: the Anthropocene is a technical categorisation of the world, neither evidence of a meaningful historical pattern already in it, nor even a meaningful historical pattern projected upon it. In its sheer redundancy, its inhabitants are therefore 'unable to say anything effective about the events and things that surround them', other than the intolerable fact that they occur.³⁸ Hence this latest appeal to history to disclose some sense in human affairs confirms only the supersession of human history itself: its loss of jurisdictional authority, its lapse into the murk of oblivion.

Clearly, as Paul Valéry points out, even though the world has been transformed by the mind, the mind has taken us 'where we had no notion of going' – it cannot be foreseen how the mind itself might be reconstituted in the future by the unanticipated effects of present action. As he remarks: 'the modern world is being remade in the image of man's mind... Now the mind is unpredictable, nor can it predict itself... If then we impose on the human world the ways of the mind, the world becomes just as unpredictable; it takes

³⁶ Shestov, L. *Athens and Jerusalem*, translated by Martin, B. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966), p. 393.

³⁷ Spengler, O. 'The World-as-History', in Gardiner, P. (ed.) *Theories of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), p. 191.

³⁸ Berardi, F. *And: Phenomenology of the End* (California: Semiotext(e), 2015), p. 331.

on the mind's disorder.'³⁹ In these comprehensively categorised, totally administrated circumstances, technological proficiency proves unable to mask existential decrepitude. The human mind has produced an environment it cannot master: a sphere of such technical complexity that its consequences exceed human prediction or control. It becomes an affront to reason; it grows inimical to human flourishing. Most essentially, it inaugurates the foreclosure of human existence: what it was, what it is, and perhaps most dispiriting of all, what it might otherwise have become.

Hence the Anthropocene is evidently not an act of emancipation – the flinging off of an oppressive garment and throwing it unceremoniously in the bin – but a painful, bureaucratic procedure. It amounts to a colossal, diagnostic survey, not unlike a medical examination undertaken on the cusp of death. Tallying up losses, calculating outstanding debts, recording symptoms of decline, giving final notice of foreclosure. Afterwards, the obituarist provides a summary of the deceased's life work, their legacy left to posterity. Here historical administration typically seeks – in its own, inadequate way – 'an accumulation of proofs – anything that can serve as evidence of a historical existence.'⁴⁰ But always, as usual, too late.

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'Crisis is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself', Frank Kermode asserts; and yet, demonstrating how times have changed, how one person's perspective is easily invalidated by later events, there now exists a true crisis in the nature of things as well as in historical comprehension itself; inherent in the relations

³⁹ Valéry, P. 'Our Destiny and Literature', translated by Folliot, D & Matthews, J., in *The Outlook for Intelligence*. Volume 10 from Bollingen Series XLV, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, edited by Matthews, J. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 167 & 176.

⁴⁰ Baudrillard, J. *The Illusion of the End*, translated by Turner, C. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 21.

between things; inherent in both things and the mind that manipulates them. This is not, then, simply a crisis of *ideas*, which could be circumvented simply by thinking different thoughts. Thinking differently is a necessary but insufficient condition for the aversion of our particular historical crisis: thoughts may change, but the crisis continues. The crisis is not just that our conceptions have not caught up with reality, or that our inherited ideas about the world have been superseded by it, but that these ideas still determine our responses to it, rendering them inadequate. Far from ‘transition’ being ‘merely that aspect of successiveness to which our attention is given’, or that ‘the fiction of transition is our way of registering the conviction that the end is immanent rather than imminent’, we cannot be sure that we are in transit to anything historically meaningful at all.⁴¹

Existing in the Anthropocene ‘in no intelligible relation to the past’, and in ‘no predictable relation to the future’, the sense of history dissolves into the dizzying, incoherent textures of immediate apprehensions played out in a general atmosphere of anxiety.⁴² The disillusionment thus inculcated is nothing other than a symptom of the diminishment of historical understanding – and hence of comprehension itself – as ‘the image of the world’, forced to accelerate to new velocities, ‘is receding from the communicative grasp of the word.’⁴³ Existing in a different dimension of time to that of the world, how can the span of a single lifetime, the experience of a mere seventy or eighty years, adequately apprehend an environment antiquated beyond human understanding?

As Stefan Zweig records, ‘in this half-century more radical changes and transformations have taken place than in ten generations of mankind; and each of us feels:

⁴¹ Kermode, F. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 101-102.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴³ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, p. 45.

it is almost too much!’ When relating his experiences of past times to younger friends, he finds his accounts ‘historical and incomprehensible to them’. He was forced to become ‘a helpless, defenceless witness’ to the horrific barbarism of two World Wars, only to then encounter, in an explosion of technical achievement, ‘the almost daily realization of the impossible of yesterday’. But he observes, tellingly, that ‘there was no protection, no security against being constantly made aware of things and being drawn into them. There was no country to which one could flee, no quiet which one could purchase; always and everywhere the hand of fate seized us and dragged us back into its insatiable play.’⁴⁴ Likewise, today the features of the historicized world intrude to devastating, incomprehensible effect. The individual lives at odds with the world as it has historically, irretrievably, turned out; sensing that one can never be reprieved, that in the Anthropocene one is doomed to bear only the burden of bygone days.

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Earlier reference (in chapter one) to the necessity of aesthesis or sense experience as a primary means of intellectual comprehension – or at least self-orientation with the organs of perception working together to map and apprehend their immediate environment in an intelligible way – is open to criticism. Notwithstanding the unavoidability of sense perception (after all, nothing can be experienced, let alone understood, without it), it seems clear that in a technologically mediated environment, our sense perception can only ever inadequately and marginally navigate a world where, as a consequence of our almost constant digital interface, and the vast surfeit of information which we can never hope to entirely apprehend, ‘‘understanding’ dwindles into confusion as the virtual and

⁴⁴ Zweig, S. *The World of Yesterday* (London: Cassell & Company, 1947), pp. 6-8.

the actual chaotically converge.’⁴⁵ Indeed, writing in the *National Geographic*, D. T. Max aptly observes that:

Our cars are our feet, our calculators are our minds, and Google is our memory. Our lives now are only partly biological, with no clear split between the organic and the technological, the carbon and the silicon. We don’t know yet where we’re going, but we’ve already left behind where we’ve been.⁴⁶

The implications of this for a perspective that might seek to circumvent or overcome the precarious historical conundrum the Anthropocene represents and in which it experientially consists through (e.g.) affirming the capacity of the human mind to orientate itself without subjection to ideological authority or digital coercion – as Kant envisioned – seems fairly bleak. As a potential ‘solution’ to the ills elaborated upon in this thesis (climatic, political, epistemic), sense experience or perception seems no tangible, measurable solution at all, being constantly manipulated, overtly or covertly, to serve the interests of corporations, governments, and assorted charlatans through massive disinformation campaigns conducted online. In its subjective perception of manifold events, of critical emergencies, the mind is overwhelmed, disorientated; its means of renewal or resistance obscured. Frequently, it retreats to the perceived safety of nationalist mythology, vacuous slogans, and carefully curated news feeds: suborned, in other words, to the ideas, goals, and interests of others.

I have therefore been wary in this thesis of overreaching, of exceeding the remit of my goal to elucidate the incarcerating ‘sense of history’ in which I argue the Anthropocene ultimately results when pushed to its logical conclusions. I have not, then, suggested ready solutions to the systemic political problems, individually if not collectively insurmountable, the thesis outlines as part of its analysis. Indeed, sense

⁴⁵ Leskanich, A. ‘A Zucking Nightmare’, in *Oxford Review of Books*, Vol. 3, Issue 3 (2019). <https://www.the-orb.org/post/a-zucking-nightmare>

⁴⁶ Max, D. T. ‘Beyond Human’, in *National Geographic*, Vol. 231, No. 4 (April 2017), p. 63.

experience is evidently not, in itself, a hard and fast, implementable ‘solution’ to these problems, and has not, therefore, been described as such in this thesis. But in affirming the intellectually regenerative – even minimally liberating – capacity of immediate experience (that is, the individual’s latent capacity to comprehend the world differently upon reflection, and perhaps change their lives in response) does leave me having to justify how, given the adverse technological and social circumstances the individual mind faces, and to which I’ve referred in the thesis, this capacity remains a real and indispensable one.

Perhaps one means of answering this in a positive sense can be found in Mark B. N. Hansen’s dense and sophisticated *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (my thanks to my examiners for drawing my attention to this book during our discussion). As he says, we are not mere ‘consumers’ of media, subjected only to the unfiltered opinions of others, but are increasingly active participants in an ecology of knowledge and information that has become integral to how we experience the world. We need not see, he suggests, ‘the transformation of human experience within twenty-first-century media networks’ as ‘a purely negative development’. Nor does our adaptation to it require our ‘passive acquiescence’ to its often inscrutable workings.⁴⁷ This is rather ‘an unprecedented opportunity for us to reconceptualize our agency’, he contends, by which he seems to mean the ability of the human mind to reorientate itself in the manner traditionally envisioned by Enlightenment luminaries using the intellectual – and now technological – resources at its disposal.

It is necessary to clarify that my rationale for drawing upon sense experience (*aesthesis*) was not in order to present it as a ‘solution’ to the issues presented in the

⁴⁷ Hansen, M. B. N. *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 268.

thesis, but to supply the existential basis and theoretical conceptions on which I conceive my critique of the Anthropocene to rest, and to show what motivates this enquiry to begin with. That is, to ‘apprehend the situation in which one is already implicated’ (as I say on page 92), it first seems necessary to outline, in basic terms, how apprehension and comprehension work together to render, in theory, one’s situation intelligible. I hoped to convey that the urgency of the topic matter derives its urgency, or its status as a problem to be explored, at least in part upon how the body, with its modes of perception attuned to the world around it, is impelled to understand where it is: to understand what it is doing, to understand why it is the way it is. This is a task which consequently requires understanding how the world is the way it is, which in turn necessitates understanding the categories and concepts through which we comprehend it. I wished to draw attention to the fact that the Anthropocene, and the multiple ecological crises it encompasses, cannot be reduced to a mere matter of theoretical interest or scholarly curiosity. This is why I chose it as a topic upon which to expound, even in the knowledge that the thesis is unable to apprehend the magnitude of the Anthropocene in its entirety, draw attention to all its ramifications, or calculate its ultimate significance, given no ultimate significance can be finally ascribed to it. What it offers – all it can offer – is a momentary snapshot, an impermanent perspective on the world perhaps already too late, given the relentless rate of change, the endless ruptures to historical continuity, the dispiriting deficiency of historical precedent, that define historicized life. Yet its supersession by later perspectives would be but a natural consequence of the mind’s refusal to accept previous perspectives as adequate to its own, still shifting situation.

Perhaps the constructive or positive aspect of the thesis, then, despite its limited aim to critique and clarify our current historical conjunction, can be developed primarily through reference to the spirit of intellectual urgency that underpins it and which it hopes

to exemplify; a groping for clarity in imperilled times. Writing, thinking, and arguing are instances in which the pragmatic capacity of the mind to discriminate, discern, and distinguish – that is, its ability to deconstruct language to see how it works, to scrutinise what and where the use of certain concepts might be leading us to do, think, or go – appears vital to its re-conception as an embedded but agential node within what Hansen calls ‘the multi-scalar complexity of an always flowing, massively technified world’; one in which ‘we come to enjoy an expanded sensory contact with worldly sensibility that affords us new potentialities for experiencing ourselves and the world – and for understanding how we experience ourselves and the world.’⁴⁸ Rightly cautioning against any complacency in this regard, and warning that the instrumentalisation of this agency by powerful institutions requires our resistance, seeing twenty-first-century media as supplemental to and potentially supportive of our agency is a timely counsel against despair. I recognise Hansen’s work as an excellent corrective to my own, admittedly dated phenomenological conception of sensibility as *aesthesis*, particularly when he emphasises that,

in contrast to any narrowly phenomenological framing of sensibility, we must embrace the technical dimension of sensibility in its entirety. For, it is only on the basis of and through our primitive and preperceptual sensible contact with the world – a contact that in today’s world *can only be* mediated by twenty-first-century media – that the world can appear to us.

Fundamentally, ‘technical media’ is ‘immanent to sensibility’; it is ‘of the world’. To me, the very existence of Hansen’s work, and that of others, proves that the mind’s capacity to orientate itself and its thinking even in a fluctuating, startlingly complex world, endures. Despite its deficiencies, it is my hope that this thesis, too, is a passing expression of this apparently irrepressible capacity.

⁴⁸ Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, p. 269.

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The position at which I arrived in this thesis – namely, that the Anthropocene both expresses and reproduces an already prevailing belief in the efficacy of historical categorisation and understanding as a means to achieve (if only inadequately and belatedly) a measure of human self-comprehension, ultimately resulting in a sense of history as incarcerating and inescapable – develops out of a negative conception of its ability to offer new ways of articulating a viable future, hamstrung as it is by a tendency, typical of historicized thinking, to simply historically affirm the way things are. Even so, I alluded in my Introduction to the nebulous character of the Anthropocene as a concept, a judgement borne out by the quite different interpretations (including my own) to which it has given rise in academic circles. Its ambiguity, I noted, is what makes it a source of intrigue, although the fact that it directly references the human probably explains its continuing appeal for humanities scholars.

Of course, a thesis or argument can seek to obscure the ambiguity of a concept by interpreting and presenting it in such a way that its ambiguity is temporarily occluded for the author's purposes. This is, after all, what argumentative precision and rigour manifestly requires: the intense focus on a single line of thought to the necessary exclusion of other information or perspectives that might threaten to disrupt it. To ensure it becomes an object capable of being scrutinised, let alone rendered amenable to argumentation, the surest way is to ignore entirely the imposition of competing phenomena constantly emerging to destabilise it. Ultimately, the higher the level of conceptual abstraction, the further the distance from the abstracted object to its imagined meaning. Putting this another way, the broader the conceptual field encompassed by the

concept in question, the less coherent and unambiguous its status. For this reason, it so happens that its meaning is never ultimately or satisfactorily accessed.

Partly for this reason, the Anthropocene's ambiguity (which is to say, its ambiguity of meaning, its uncertain semantic status in our family of concepts) cannot, it seems to me, be finally resolved, removed, or wished away in such a manner that could satisfy all subsequent reflection upon it. From a certain perspective, the Anthropocene is an attractive 'elevator' on which to extend the scope of human understanding about our activities into both the past and future; a category so comprehensive, so tautologous, there's nothing human it couldn't conceivably explain. Wary of precisely this characteristic, I suggested that its sheer scope masks an underlying commitment to an inadequate, even redundant, conception of history's value. One might add, however, that the Anthropocene, in being so blatant an example of the understandable desire to stabilise human existence via its comprehensive historicization, at least provides an opportunity to probe our received wisdom about history as a technology on which we so heavily rely for orientation. Here its ambiguity is what renders it intriguing: if it wasn't ambiguous, it would be considerably less interesting. Its meaning would be already resolved; it would merge seamlessly into received wisdom or disciplinary orthodoxy (as in some quarters it already has).

How to 'resolve' the ambiguous without recourse to what is itself ambiguous? For example, there doesn't seem all that much wrong with saying the Anthropocene signifies our current geological epoch, until you wonder what an epoch is, and what defines one. There doesn't seem any harm in saying we live in the Anthropocene as a geohistorical category encompassing the entire range of ecological processes unfolding on earth, until you wonder who decided we were. You might query why something as indeterminate

and ambiguous as history can possibly be relied upon to disclose the meaning or significance of a world exceeding the ability of the human mind to manage it.

It doesn't seem right that we can have it both ways: surely the Anthropocene is either a useful way of describing where we're at, or it isn't. But this is too hasty. That it is useful for certain scholarly purposes in certain fields but simultaneously, if unintentionally, reinforces damaging misconceptions about the superiority of human existence is (for example) a consequence of an unresolvable indeterminacy in the nature of language itself. That is, the Anthropocene is a category of uncertain proportions because the world it categorises is itself an object of uncertain proportions, potentialities, and possibilities. Since the scale of the world is disproportionate to human reason, to our historically inflected linguistic categories, then the Anthropocene can only ever be an insufficient – i.e. ambiguous – measure of it. We try to get the measure of the world with language, only to discover that getting the measure of the world requires getting the measure of ourselves as a species whose actions are temporally asymmetrical to our understanding of them. And so it is with language. Being the world's measure, it turns out, ultimately means measuring ourselves. But we discover that our means of measuring ourselves (our conceptual space-time coordinates inherited from a very different past to our present), and hence the world, are out of proportion to its inconceivable scale. Unable to circumvent this temporal as well as linguistic asymmetry, the Anthropocene ends up reflecting and revealing yet again that disconcerting gap between thought and being, sense and conception, which it attempts to remedy – although without, in my view, much success.

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