

## **The impact of the Anthropocene on human health, and what to do about it.**

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### *1) Intro – where we are*

First of all, the name-giving “anthropos”, the human being homo sapiens sapiens - even if he is exceptional in many ways - will have to concede exceptionality to other beings as well. To face the challenges of “anthropocene”, and be able to survive, we will have to change our mindset and readjust the scales. Taking off the blinkers, we can find endless examples of exceptionality with all kinds of different beings, close to or remote from humans. Just opening our minds to it we become aware of extraordinary capacities and skills, like, for example, the exceptional navigation abilities of a small migratory bird, the Arctic tern, who not only finds its way over 30.000 km from the south polar regions to the northern ones. One individual's flight track showed an annual flight distance of 90.000 km. This seems truly amazing, even more so if you consider the bird's size of 28–39 cm (11–15 inches), wingspan of 65–75 cm (26–30 inches) and weight of 86 – 127 grams.

So for now, let me begin with a short scene of acknowledgement, of experiencing the agency of a non human animal, that informs a connection between humans and other animals. On a recent mountain trip, we were hiking in one of Bavaria's stunningly beautiful landscapes, alongside a mountain lake with turquoise water and steep cliffs prompting out of the waves. Near the lakeshore there were a couple of ducks swimming leisurely, and one especially small duckling kept diving under water, obviously preparing herself and planning where to look for food at the next dive. She headed down to the plants in a vertical move, steering exactly with her little swimmer's feet and nibbling with relish the water plants only to come back in a speedy upward movement, shaking off the water drops. The scene had a magnetic beauty since every movement followed the next in what seemed to be an elegant but very energetic choreography. Beside us stood two little boys who also watched the duckling's performance and obviously had as much fun as we did. They commented on the beauty and speed of the small animal and showed affection and admiration. It was obvious that they shared some of the energy which was performed by the small bird – a seemingly enjoyable state of being, movement, pure joy. Part of the interest

was certainly the impression that the duckling had clear ideas of what to do next and how to achieve her goal. She lived her story, so to speak. She demonstrated her own will and clearly was the one who told her own story – she was the agent of her own life. The awareness of this agency made it possible for the boys to connect to her. They realised that the bird had a life, a world in which she herself was a protagonist. Of course, they probably did not analyse the situation in detail, but this is what happens when human and non-human animals share presence. Philosopher Lori Gruen describes this phenomenon in her book “Entangled Empathy”: “This sort of reaction is referred to as “emotional contagion” or “affective resonance”. It is a kind of embodied response to another individual or individuals in one’s immediate environment and does not require any reflection or conceptualization or even understanding. This very basic type of empathy involves the direct perception of the emotions of others and automatically triggers or “activates the same emotion in the perceiver, without any intervening labelling, associative or cognitive perspective-taking processes.”<sup>1</sup>

This **is** exactly what happened at the lakeshore. Some minutes later 2 adults passed by, showing interest, only for a short amount of time, but respectfully commenting on the diving and swimming: “That’s something we can’t do.” I am sure they all would have protested if anyone had grabbed the beautiful small bird, or even her mother, to prepare them for dinner.

## *2) Agency and fatalism*

So what does this story have to do with the consequences of the so-called “anthropocene”, on human health and well-being? What I am aiming at is to show the inclination of living beings to connect to other living beings, to share moments of life and the ability to care for each other. This ability is part of the status quo of living beings – any kind of non human animal needs a certain ability to socialise and communicate, otherwise life would not be possible.

Taking into account the ongoing entanglement of biographies of different species, it might become more obvious why a growing consciousness of countless relations is

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Gruen: Entangled Empathy. An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals. P. 46 Lantern Books, 2014

important. What actually is at stake, in this time of “anthropocene”, is the loss of habitat.

You are all probably familiar with the expression “anthropocene” – at any rate we all are subject to its consequences. “Anthropocene” means the time/era, in which massive changes in nature are caused by human behaviour, as opposed by changes by natural causes like meteorites. Some date the beginning of the human-inflicted changes before the western “common era”, when massive deforestation began.

“The Anthropocene defines Earth's most recent geologic time period as being human-influenced, or anthropogenic, based on overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes are now altered by humans.”<sup>2</sup> Recently – the last decades – there has been an exponential increase of the exploitation of treasures of the soil, slash and burn, global warming, increase of Co<sub>2</sub> emissions, etc. The causes are, as we know, the heating of the atmosphere, draughts, floods, apocalyptic events, you name it. The exact consequences cannot be foreseen, as some parts of the processes are hidden or just far away from human knowledge. To pay tribute to the insight that Earth's complexity can not be calculated by technical and rational logic, Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock created the concept of “Gaia”. The expression “Gaia” implies the complexity of eco-systems, which is regarded as a super-organism, to accentuate that it is a living environment, not a sequence of mechanical, chemical, objective data. Science historian and biologist Donna Haraway describes it as follows: „Earth/Gaia is maker and destroyer, not resource to be exploited or ward to be protected or nursing mother promising nourishment. Gaia is not a person but complex systemic phenomena that compose a living planet. Gaia's intrusion into our affairs is a radically materialist event that collects up multitudes. This intrusion threatens not life on Earth itself – microbes will adapt, to put it mildly – but threatens the livability of Earth for vast kinds, species, assemblages, and individuals in an “event” already under way called the Sixth Great Extinction.“<sup>3</sup>

Haraway has been suggesting not to speak of “anthropocene” when referring to this accelerated exploitation era, but of “capitalocene”, because she says it is necessary

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<sup>2</sup> <http://anthropocene.info/>

<sup>3</sup> [www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-ulucene/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-ulucene/)

to keep in mind what triggered the ongoing devastation and alienation from earth as our home and to non human animals and plants as kin. She created a new term, speaking of “Chthulucene” instead. The name is inspired by an octopoid science fiction monster of H.P. Lovecraft, “Chtulu” which is spelled similarly, but Haraway’s spelling is alluding to the greek meaning of chthonic matters, that means, referring to mythologies of earth. To talk about the “Chthulucene” means interrupting the ongoing story as “man the maker” or “man **pus** technics and tool as the maker” end so on, that over-accentuate human influence. In order to counteract defeatism and fatalism, a mindset that gives in to apocalyptic scenarios that allow for enjoying the last possibilities before the final showdown of the planet, Haraway thinks of a contraction of forces, to set against destructive forces. The word “Chthulucene” is an expression that gives back agency, instead of fatalist passivity. It is a call to arms for survival – physically and mentally. She writes: “The Chthulucene was, is, and can still be full of (...) ‘Holocene resurgence’, or ‘feral biologies’—i.e., of the ongoingness—of a wild, cultivated and uncultivated, dangerous, but plentiful earth for always evolving critters including human people. Mixed and dangerous, the Chthulucene is the temporality of our home world, terra. (...) All of us who care about recuperation, partial connections, and resurgence must learn to live and die well in the entanglements of the tentacular without always seeking to cut and bind everything in our way.”<sup>4</sup>

So we see, it is all about connectedness. Not in a naive way that interprets everything in favour of or at least related to human interests. On the contrary, it is one of our last chances to react to provocations that thwart the narrative of an ever evolving progress.

### *3) Connections, inter human and inter species*

Mental and psychic health is decreasing. In one way, this is quite surprising, if we consider the fact that in the western societies, is on the rise. Loneliness is seen as an emerging problem in these societies. There seems to be a lack of connectedness. Many people report that one of their main sources of regaining energy is spending

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<sup>4</sup> <https://laboratoryplanet.org/en/manifeste-chthulucene-de-santa-cruz/>

some time in nature.

So one simple question would be: How can we reconnect? Which means, how can we regain power? First of all, it is necessary to acknowledge that what is happening to earth, our surroundings, our fellow human animals and non human animals has an impact on ourselves. It is literally happening to all of us. We are not, contrary to the narrative of individualism, separated isolated beings. There are many descriptions of the interdependent phenomena, but here I want to quote the baroque philosopher and mathematician Leibniz, because his argumentation has the bizarre beauty of physical descriptions: “In the world of composites, the world of matter, everything is full, which means that all matter is interlinked. If there were empty space, a body might move in it without affecting any other body; but that is not how things stand. In a plenum [= ‘world that is full’], any movement must have an effect on distant bodies, the greater the distance the smaller the effect, but always some effect. Here is why. Each body is affected by the bodies that touch it, and feels some effects of everything that happens to them; but also through them it also feels the effects of all the bodies that touch them, and so on, so that such communication extends indefinitely.”<sup>5</sup> This description shows how single movements merge into the whole structure. Living bodily beings share the ability to be affected, because there is no way to escape bodily experiences. The insight that the conjunction of corporeality and soul inside the subjects reach out and create connection make it possible to escape the cold realm of abstract theories of separated individuals, realising its incompleteness and distortion. Because interconnectedness is taking place, “each body feels the effects of everything that happens in the universe, so that” – if such a position were possible, as I would like to remark – “he who sees everything could read off from each body what is happening everywhere; and, indeed, because he could see in its present state what is distant both in space and in time, he could read also what has happened and what will happen...”<sup>6</sup> This way, the experiences of other beings are not only perceptible, they also influence our own being in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> G. W, Leibniz: Monadology.

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/leibniz1714b.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> ibd.

So the point I want to make here is, referring to the ongoing atrocities against a living planet and its living beings, human and non human: how could we NOT be affected by the mechanisation of relations, the sadist exploitation dynamics? From a psychological perspective, the question of how to deal with the violent everyday practice of exploiting and killing millions of sentient beings, may escalate in the assumption of a causal relation between the readiness to use violence and psychological well being of a society. From a philosophical perspective, one of the questions that arise as soon as we use the bodies of other living beings, that have been put to death for the only reason of eating or clothing habits, is: can it be ethically maintained to deprive another sentient being, maybe even possessing a soul, from its right to live? Putting it more bluntly: what gives us the right to discriminate them on the one hand into “significant others”, as Donna Haraway points out<sup>7</sup> (like pet-companions), and on the other hand into nameless production material, aka livestock? Following Derrida, we can describe the treatment of these animals as unequal fight and even an ongoing war<sup>8</sup> (une lutte inégale, une guerre en cours). From a psychological perspective, the question of how to deal with the violent everyday practice of exploiting and killing millions of sentient beings, may escalate in the assumption of a causal relation between the readiness to use violence and psychological well being of a society.

#### *4) Empathy and the ability of being affected*

So it will be necessary to revive the innate power of empathy, which we are losing or forced to lose in most cases in the process of – cynically named – “socialisation”. It will be an act of courage to reintegrate empathy into the self, but it will help revive a life-loving attitude, which will exude a newly gained liveliness.

The human animal child clearly has a full reservoir of empathy and curiosity, key factors for connection and communication. They make use of the innate connectedness that comes with being alive. Living beings share an inner instrument of communication which we call “psyche”, or “soul”. I see psyche as an instrument of connection, of communication between living beings. Beyond being a personal “tool” or focal point, it is a center of an individual's emotions, thought and behaviour. The

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<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway 2008: When Species Meet.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida 2006: L'Animal que donc je suis.

soul is responsible for reaching out to another living being. It facilitates the individual's responses to his or her environment. It is the instrument of integration. It will be important to give psyche, or soul back their tasks. It is therefore necessary to claim the importance of soul and rehabilitate its purpose., It will not be sufficient in this process, to just add some “soulful components” to a soul-depleted rationality, for example in therapy sessions. It will not be enough to concede some well measured amounts of psyche to an otherwise hyper-rationalist life-style that sees everything in technical sequences. In this worldview, the “anthropocene”, soul would be something like a luxury product, not really necessary but nice to have. As if having a soul was some kind of redundance, a superficial add-on for esoterics who have enough time, and money to indulge into unnecessary flight of fancy. But the point is to integrate soul into a newly defined world model, which means to acknowledge soul and its stirrings as connectivity-producing energy.

If psyche can expand beyond therapeutic deliberations, into which soul’s concerns currently are mostly locked, psychical phenomena can act in an affective philosophy. I use the word “affective” in relation to Spinoza, and, following him, Deleuze. Affect is a central point in Spinoza’s worldview – in which bodies, things and events are always in motion. It is a “world in the making”, in which we can be affected by those who surround us, and affect others by our own presence. The capacity to be affected is seen as an asset, not a weakness. He articulated “a philosophy in which people were inherently intertwined with their world. (...) Everything is alive and connected. Mind and body, human and nonhuman, joy and sadness, are intertwined with one another.”<sup>9</sup>

This way, psychical events become important fundamentals and basics for an interconnectedness. An understanding of interconnectedness will enhance and promote communication of the many, the “multitude”, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call it, and therefore strengthen the joint forces of rescuing the remaining common possible habitat on earth. The multitude expands from human to non human life, it includes the biosphere which has also been named “Gaia”. What is at stake is the common ground, the home of the many: “We are at stake to each other. Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the Earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this Earth are the main story.”<sup>10</sup>

Having heard this, we have to ask ourselves how we establish sustainable relations

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<sup>9</sup> carla bergman, Nick Montgomery: Joyful Militancy, p.86-87

<sup>10</sup> <https://laboratoryplanet.org/en/manifeste-chthulucene-de-santa-cruz/>

to our common ground. What we do to our fellow critters will be one of the most important questions. When we keep in mind, and when we are able to feel, what is going on when living beings are subject to (ultra free) market logic, by mistaking them as things and objects, we will have to change behaviour radically. “From the perspective of entangled empathy, (...) the question becomes: What are you going to do about the relationships you have with nonhuman animals? Are you content for those relationships to be characterized by domination, violence and disregard? Are you comfortable with the habits of belief and behaviour fostered by your own speciecism?”<sup>11</sup>

Note: “Speciecism” means the conviction that members of different species have different value.

##### *5) More than human- Why animals matter*

The necessity to include non human beings into reflections of psychical empowerment is evident, as many researchers in psychology constantly declare: the human animal relation can be even a healing one. This is why animal assisted therapy is gaining more and more attention. Especially when working with children, or verbally restricted clients, or elderly patients. As psychiatrist Ivan Dimitrijević points out: “An animal may serve as a link in psychotherapy, enabling easier entry into sensitive content.”<sup>12</sup> He refers to an animal “as behavioural facilitator in the mental health area.” (Animal assisted therapy) improves attention, concentration, and self-esteem, reduces anxiety and loneliness, improves verbal interaction, and develops recreation and leisure abilities.”<sup>13</sup> And he adds: “Educationally, it improves vocabulary, as well as long- and short-term memory. Motivationally, the presence of an animal increases the desire for joining in group and social activities, and improves

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<sup>11</sup> patrice jones in *Entangled Empathy*, p.100

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Dimitrijević: ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY – A NEW TREND IN THE TREATMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADDULTS, *Psychiatria Danubina*, 2009; Vol. 21, No. 2, pp 236–241, here p. 239

<sup>13</sup> Ivan Dimitrijević: ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY – A NEW TREND IN THE TREATMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADDULTS, *Psychiatria Danubina*, 2009; Vol. 21, No. 2, pp 236–241, here p. 236

interaction with others.”<sup>14</sup>

So it seems animals can help us to redefine positions in life. In this context, it will be necessary to highlight the importance of the animal’s impact as a personality, which also will pose questions as to the engagement of animals into human affairs. Clearly, here is a lot to be done to make visible how valuable the sheer presence of an animal can be. There will also be the question of dignity – at least if these animals are respected and appreciated as persons of influence. As has been noticed as a trending leisure occupation, adopting an animal is adding sense to people’s lives, as documented by various people, especially in Britain this year, who adopted hens and now feel closely connected to them. One experience was shared in “The Guardian”, titled “Adopted Battery-hens saved my life experience”. The journalist Ruth Addicott recounts how Paul Checkley was told by a friend to adopt hens, arguing that they, like him had had a horrible life so far – Checkley had been sexually abused in childhood and had later developed suicidal tendencies and alcoholism. He says: “I had always felt good around animals, and I’ve got a huge garden, so I contacted the local rescue centre and went down for a look. It was like something from a horror story. The hens were in such a state: they had no feathers and the bottom of their beaks had been cut off. It shocked me to tears. I took in four hens to start with, and they changed my life. I quickly realised that these hens depended on me, and that gave me a purpose. I thought, if they can cope with the trauma they have experienced, then I’ve got to find the strength myself. They were terrified at first, but the first time they ran out of that coop, flapping their wings, was one of the most pleasurable moments of my life. (...) They jump on my trousers, sit on my shoulders, they make me smile. I hadn’t properly smiled in 40 years. Even my psychiatrist said, “Paul, this is the best I’ve seen you.” I’d never spoken about the abuse, locking it away in the back of my mind, but one day last August I broke down and told my psychiatrist everything. The hens had made me feel I could be more open. When I heard them clucking, I thought, if they can still speak after what they’ve been through, so can I.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ibd. P. 236-237

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/mar/24/adopted-battery-hens-saved-my-life-experience>

## *6) Not for but with each other*

So, as we pointed out, we are not trying to present the aspects of animals' usefulness for humans. The perspective in which the whole universe is interpreted in regard of the benefit for humans is only producing hierarchy. In fact it is quite alarming how even the smallest insect or plant in the biosphere of the woods is subjected to this aspect, as Peter Wohlleben, the forester, pointed out to me in a conversation. He wrote about the inner life of trees and, a bit later, the inner life of animals. The point is not to ask: "Does this insect/this flower/anything/... make sense related to human interests?" The point is neither – is it a "good solution" for humans? As if nature had a "wise" moral quality to it, favorising humanity, in a way that in the end everything would turn out to be positive for humans. It is even possible or highly probable that human intervention is exactly the problem. In nature, Wohlleben says, there are circuits, spirals, entangled biographies of species, plants, animals, etc., but there is not such a thing as a "happy ending", especially not for humankind. If humans don't learn to integrate, their time will be limited. This is no dystopian fantasy, but rational conclusion.

So to get away from these cost-benefit-considerations, we have to focus on the intrinsic values of other living beings, even though and especially when they are not human, because exactly this is the quality of the relation. Psychology teaches us that it is necessary to have different sorts of relations, connections, points of reference in life. The feeling of comfort that Paul Checkley experienced in the presence of those hens have certainly a very different quality than a human encounter. The absence of verbal communication triggers different channels of communication – and here we begin to trace the emotional and empathic regions of human psyche. The emergence of a feeling of connectedness is sometimes described as being together in a shared presence. As if living beings were supporting each other in the pure struggle of being alive, as shown in the story with the hens. Or just sharing some blissful moments of beauty, like in the introduction of this presentation – the sheer pleasure of being alive and moving around. The aspect of experiencing moments of joy or of intensity

together enhances our life, and there are many experiences to share with non human animals to create a life full of impressions which go far beyond anthropocentrism.

It is necessary to understand that the cosmos does not and did not evolve for the sake of humans, and it is crucial to realize that human domination did little to show any traits of superiority. On the contrary, the complex connections of natural processes have by far not been researched enough, when we think of plants' communication, for example. It is necessary to step back, humbly, and try to interfere as little as possible.

As human animals are communicative beings, they have the possibility to react to informations and change behaviour. Information is far more than just "objective, scientific" facts: data and numbers. Actually, empathy is an information. It is a message that can be shared.