

Anthropocene

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Coined in the early 2000s, the term Anthropocene originally emerged from the natural sciences. It refers to a geochronological epoch shaped substantially by humans, which replaced the Holocene and in which humans themselves have become a force of nature. However, the concept is not limited to scientific and technological phenomena. Due to the entanglement between humans and nature implicit in the term itself, the Anthropocene also carries an ethical meaning that manifests itself above all in questions about human responsibility for nature. Despite various criticisms of its descriptive and normative adequacy, and despite its rejection by the International Commission on Stratigraphy in 2024, the term remains interdisciplinarily generative, especially with regard to theological, nature-ethical, nature-aesthetic, and cultural-philosophical questions

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Editorial Note

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1. History of the Concept

The term Anthropocene was coined in the early 2000s by meteorologist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen  (1933–2021).^[1] Crutzen introduces the Anthropocene as a new (*kainós*) geochronological epoch (“Geology of Mankind”) that has been significantly shaped by humans (*ánthropos*) and that has replaced the most recent geological epoch, the Holocene. He dates the beginning of the Anthropocene to the end of the 18th century and bases this on findings in ice cores whose contents provide information about the changing composition of the atmosphere since that time.^[2] Crutzen dates the Anthropocene more precisely to 1784, the year in which James Watt’s  inventions

provided a tremendous boost to steam engine technology. This in turn paved the way for the Industrial Revolution that, continuing unabated ever since, has spread throughout the world. Even before Crutzen coined the term, the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani ^{GND} had introduced the concept of the “Anthropozoic era” and the French paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin ^{GND} had introduced the concept of the “noosphere.”^[3]

Whether the term “Anthropocene” is an adequate term for the diagnosis and criticism of anthropogenic environmental and climate problems has significant implications for the question of the extent to which it is suitable as a basis for nature ethics. The normative content of the concept of the Anthropocene can be described as follows: Humans should live responsibly, not only towards their fellow humans and future generations but also towards nature, which they are transforming ever more pervasively. From a theological perspective on responsibility and ethics, the mandate to rule, as formulated in Genesis 1:28, is central here. This raises the question of how exactly the Hebrew word *kavash* (כָּבַשׁ), often translated as “subdue,” is to be understood.^[4]

Furthermore, the concept of the Anthropocene seems to convey a form of anthropocentrism that is restricted to humans and that, in current nature and environmental ethics, stands in contrast with normatively extensional positions such as biocentrism, physiocentrism, and pathocentrism.^[5]

A geological perspective on the conceptual dynamics of the Anthropocene has already been noted above. It has been suggested that the Anthropocene should be understood as a transition “from the environing world [*Umwelt*] to the us-world [*Unswelt*].”^[6] As the description of the conceptual shift in the Anthropocene becomes more precise, the concept of nature begins to lose its analytical utility. If we try to understand this conceptual shift using the traditional distinction between primary, pre-existing nature and secondary, manufactured nature (i.e., culture), we soon recognize that a hybrid is emerging that cannot be reduced to either the first or the second nature. Accordingly, the phenomena of the Anthropocene cannot be understood independently of human culture; nor do they merge completely and immediately into it. Humans in the Anthropocene do not transform primary nature in such a way that they completely permeate, trans-humanistically replace, or dominate it. Rather, the Anthropocene is about ecological structures and conditions that humans transform and that subsequently indirectly affect them.

The nature-culture-reshapings (*Überformungen*) in the Anthropocene are not readily apparent. They occur not so much materially as structurally insofar as natural phenomena, conditions, and processes are modified and their dynamics redirected or radicalized. Since human actions are having ever more far-reaching technological consequences that can no longer be overlooked, the Anthropocene transformation is increasingly taking on global dimensions. This is precisely why a nature-ethical classification of the Anthropocene is problematic. That is, the phenomenon of the Anthropocene cannot be clearly grasped using the conventional terms in nature ethics such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, pathocentrism, or physiocentrism.^[7]

Due to its proximity to anthropocentrism, the concept of the Anthropocene has been subject to numerous criticisms. Insofar as trans- and posthumanist hopes have been attached to it, the idea of the Anthropocene has become a “religion of salvation”^[8] (*Erlösungsreligion*) in the natural sciences.^[9] Criticisms of positions like this are justified. However, they do not concern the concept of the Anthropocene as such but only a particular, normatively charged, and radically techno-optimistic variant of it that reduces first nature to second nature and thus overestimates human power over nature by concealing its own natural and bodily (*leiblich-natürlich*) mode of existence.

In March 2024, the concept of the Anthropocene was rejected by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) as a designation for a new official geochronological epoch.^[10] Despite this rejection, the ICS emphasized the interdisciplinary significance and adequacy of the term as an “invaluable descriptor of human impact on the Earth system.”^[11]

2. Anthropocene between Nature and Culture

Even though naturalness and artificiality can always be understood as “poles of a spectrum”^[12] (since the artificial always depends on and refers to the natural), the concept of the Anthropocene suggests a redefinition of both terms that goes beyond this polar spectrum. By designating a global sphere in which naturalness and artificiality are inextricably intertwined, the concept of the Anthropocene undermines the distinction between nature and culture.

Adopting this line of thought, Bruno Latour  understands the Anthropocene as anthro-geology or geo-anthropology. He defines the concept of the Anthropocene as an “oxymoron linking geology and humanity.”^[13] According to Latour, the concept of the Anthropocene is significant in many respects. For one thing, its origins are not humanistic (*geistwissenschaftlich*) but natural-scientific/empirical or even “naturalistic.” As such a hybrid term, it surpasses even the most anthropocentric theses of the humanities: “No postmodern philosopher, no anthropologist, no liberal theologian, no political thinker would have dared measure the influence of humans *on the same scale* as rivers, volcanos, erosion, and biochemistry.”^[14] The concept of the Anthropocene can therefore be applied to a wide variety of non-natural sciences, i.e., humanities, and social sciences. It thwarts postmodern theories of the “end of the human” by demonstrating humanity’s omnipresence in nature, the supposed counterpart to culture. According to Latour, the concept of the Anthropocene is “the most radical term of all for putting an end to anthropocentrism”^[15] and is suited to function as “the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological, and [...] political concept for beginning to turn away for good from the notions of ‘Modern’ and ‘modernity.’”^[16]

3. Anthropocene Ethics

The conditions within the Anthropocene render our usual understanding of action and (moral) accountability problematic. This is because the term suggests that humanity is a collective subject in relation to which individual actions lose their significance, even though it is precisely the sum of these actions that constitutes humanity. Viewed from the perspective of nature ethics, the new, global causality of human actions draws attention to the distinction between spatially and temporally localizable environmental damage and global asynchronous climate damage: While environmental damage affects our immediate surroundings and can therefore be caused and experienced or suffered more or less directly, climate damage manifests itself spatiotemporally, thereby making it epistemically problematic.^[17] With that said, immediate epistemic accessibility to anthropogenic damage to nature is an important prerequisite for identifying and demanding alternative courses of action.

The concept of the Anthropocene foregrounds nature-ethical questions in particular. Nature has no value in itself (this would lead to a naturalistic fallacy), nor does it derive its value solely from humans (this would be uncritical anthropocentrism). Rather, an ethics of the Anthropocene must show that and how natural normativity can be conceived and justified through humanity's relationship with nature and, at the same time, with itself.^[18]

The relationship between nature and the self is already evident *in nuce* in the relationship between humans and their own bodily (*leiblich*) nature, which they transform through media without ever being able to completely replace it with technology. Understood as the primary natural medium of humans, the lived-body (*Leib*) occupies that same intermediate position between first and second nature that we discover in the Anthropocene. It is given to us directly, while the Anthropocene is often mediated to us. In this respect, the human being's bodily (*leiblich*) self-relationship and self-understanding prove to be the key to the more complex relationship with nature in the Anthropocene (*anthropozänisches Naturverhältnis*). For in each individual human being, a rudimentary Anthropocene-like relationship is already present, which is globally and generally extended and mediated in the Anthropocene. This shows that, ultimately, the problem of the Anthropocene not only concerns recent technological developments but also includes a fundamental anthropological dimension of mediality (*Medialität*), which, in view of the recent discussion about climate ethics, is becoming increasingly significant and is affecting us existentially.

Recommended Literature

Hastings, Thomas John/Sæther, Knut-Willy (Eds.), Views of Nature and Dualism. Rethinking Philosophical, Theological, and Religious Assumptions in the Anthropocene, Cham 2023.

Latour, Bruno, Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime, translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge 2017.

Citations

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- ² Cf. Crutzen, Geology, 23.
- ³ Cf. Crutzen, Geology, 23.
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- ⁵ For an overview, see Krebs, Angelika, Naturethik im Überblick, in: idem (Ed.), Naturethik. Grundtexte der gegenwärtigen tier- und ökoethischen Diskussion, Frankfurt a. M. 1997, 337–379.
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- ⁷ For a categorization, see Krebs, Naturethik, 342.
- ⁸ Manemann, Jürgen, Kritik des Anthropozäns. Plädoyer für eine neue Humanökologie, Bielefeld 2014, 22, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ⁹ Cf. Manemann, Kritik, 90.
- ¹⁰ International Commission on Stratigraphy, Joint Statement by the IUGS and ICS on the Vote by the ICS Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, 21.03.2024 (<https://stratigraphy.org/news/152>), accessed on 03.06.2026.
- ¹¹ ICS, Statement.
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- ¹⁴ Latour, Gaia, 117.
- ¹⁵ Latour, Gaia, 117.
- ¹⁶ Latour, Gaia, 116.
- ¹⁷ On this distinction, see Birnbacher, Dieter, Klimaethik. Eine Einführung, Ditzingen 2022, 9ff.
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