



## O ANTROPOCENO OU O “FIM” DO IMPERATIVO RESPONSABILIDADE

### *The Anthropocene or the ‘End’ of the Imperative Responsibility*

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**Resumo:** Meu artigo pretende esboçar o *Paradoxo da Oniresponsabilidade*, mais precisamente o paradoxo ético que emerge do assim chamado Antropoceno como nosso quadro epocal corrente. O principal resultado desse paradoxo é a *superação do princípio/imperativo responsabilidade de Hans Jonas como um padrão ético* para o pensamento ecológico (e mais geralmente, filosófico) nas décadas recentes. Se o imperativo responsabilidade foi a pedra de toque de “uma ética para a época tecnológica”, provavelmente não consegue exercer o mesmo papel na época antropocênica/tecnocênica. Meu argumento procede como segue: o primeiro estágio trata de uma dissecação crítica do Antropoceno como “discurso” (§ 1); o segundo estágio introduz a *Petificação da Natureza* (i. é, a caracterização do organismo planetário como um *pet*), o *Prometeísmo Aidosiano* (i. é, uma nova forma de antropocentrismo) e o *Paradoxo da Oniresponsabilidade* como resultados básicos do quadro antropocênico (§ 2); no terceiro e último estágio, derivarei minhas conclusões relativas à redefinição do *Antropo-ceno* como *Tecno-ceno* e a proposta de um *renovado diálogo ético entre responsabilidade e liberação*, isto é, entre Jonas e Heidegger (§ 3).

**Palavras-Chaves:** imperativo responsabilidade; Antropoceno; ética (ética ambiental); antropocentrismo; filosofia da tecnologia; liberação (*Gelassenheit*)

**Abstract** My paper aims to sketch *the Paradox of Omni-responsibility*, namely the ethical paradox that emerges from the so-called Anthropocene considered as our current epochal framework. The main outcome of this paradox is the *overcoming of Hans Jonas’s principle/imperative responsibility as an ethical standard* for ecological (and more generally, philosophical) thought over recent decades. If the imperative responsibility has been the cornerstone of an “ethics for the technological age”, it probably cannot play the same role in the anthropocenic/technocenic age. My argument proceeds as follows. The first stage deals with a critical dissection of the Anthropocene as “discourse” (§ 1); the second stage introduces the *Pet-tification of Nature* (i.e. the characterization of the planetary organism as a *pet*), the *Aidosean Prometheanism* (i.e. a new form of anthropocentrism) and the *Paradox of Omni-responsibility* as basic outcomes of the anthropocenic framework (§ 2); in the third and final stage, I will draw my conclusions concerning the *redefinition of Anthro-po-cene as Techno-cene* and the proposal of a *renewed ethical dialogue between responsibility and releasement*, that is between Jonas and Heidegger (§ 3).

**Keywords:** imperative responsibility; Anthropocene; ethics (environmental ethics); anthropocentrism; philosophy of technology; releasement (*Gelassenheit*).

### Premise

As premise of my argument I must clarify that this paper is part of a larger project on the philosophical anthropology of technology that I have been working on for some years. It concerns the establishment of a *Philosophy of Technology in the Nominative Case* (TECNOM). TECNOM interprets technology as an epochal phenomenon the basic outcomes of which can be expressed in the concepts of *Neoenvironmentality*, *Feralization of the Human Being* and *Anthropic Perimeter*. Taken together, these outcomes lead me to a redefinition of the so-called *Anthro-po-cene* as *Techno-cene*,

namely its identification with what philosophical thought has characterized as *technisches Zeitalter* (technological age) or Günther Anders’ idea on technology becoming the “subject of history”.<sup>1</sup> According to Jonas, the Anthropocene as Technocene equates to an epoch in which “technology is destiny.”<sup>2</sup> It is therefore within the theoretical framework of this project on the philosophy of technology that the current paper finds its meaning, its natural *pendant*.

Given this premise, the following pages aim to sketch the *ethical paradox (the Paradox of Omni-responsibility)* that emerges from the Anthropocene considered as our current epochal framework. The main outcome of this paradox is the *overcoming of Hans Jonas’s principle/imperative responsibility* as an ethical standard for ecological (and more generally, philosophical) thought over recent decades. More precisely, the overcoming of Jonas’s position emerges as a natural consequence of his basic assumption, that is: “with certain developments of our powers the nature of human action has changed, and, since ethics is concerned with action, it should follow that the changed nature of human action calls for a change in ethics as well”.<sup>3</sup> My point is that our acknowledgment of the Anthropocene/Technocene represents a further change in the nature of human action, and that this change requires a further change in ethics. In a formula, if the imperative responsibility has been the cornerstone of an “ethics for the technological age”,<sup>4</sup> it probably cannot play the same role in the anthropogenic/technogenic age.

My argument proceeds as follows. The first stage deals with a *critical dissection of the Anthropocene as “discourse”* (§ 1); the second stage introduces the *Pet-tification of Nature* (i.e. the characterization of the planetary organism as a pet), the *Aidosean Prometheanism* (i.e. a new form of anthropocentrism) and the *Paradox of Omni-responsibility* as basic outcomes of the anthropogenic framework (§ 2); in the third and final stage, I will draw my *conclusions* concerning the *redefinition of Anthropocene as Technocene* and the proposal of a *renewed ethical dialogue between responsibility and releasement*, that is *between Jonas and Heidegger* (§ 3).

## 1. A critical dissection of the Anthropocene

As is well-known, the term “Anthropocene” refers to an aspirant new geological epoch, the third epoch (after Pleistocene and Holocene) of the Quaternary period. This label was first put forth in 2000 by the Dutch chemist and Nobel prize winner Paul Jozef Crutzen in a very brief article – a kind of *anthropogenic manifesto* – entitled *The “Anthropocene”*, published in the *Newsletter of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme* (IGBP). It was signed by Crutzen and Eugene Filmore Stoermer (1934-2012), an American biologist who had already ‘informally’ used the word “Anthropocene” in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Crutzen’s proposal moves from the assumption that, beginning around the year 1800 – i.e. “the onset of industrialization” – “humans and our societies have become a global geophysical force”.<sup>6</sup> In other words: “The term Anthropocene [...] suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita* (unknown land).”<sup>7</sup> Already listed in the anthropogenic manifesto are the parameters which objectively show the escalation of the ‘anthropic variable’ (i.e. human agency) over

<sup>1</sup> Anders 1992, 9, 271-278.

<sup>2</sup> Jonas 2003, 193.

<sup>3</sup> Jonas 1985, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> See Crutzen & Stoermer 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Steffen & Crutzen 2007, 614. In Steffen & Crutzen et al. 2011b, 843 they write “humankind has become a global geological force in its own right”.

<sup>7</sup> Steffen & Crutzen 2007, 614.

the last three centuries, namely: increasing human population, urbanization, exploitation of fossil fuels, the so-called “sixth mass extinction”, climate change and the concentration of greenhouse gases. In particular, Crutzen & Stoermer consider the anthropogenic exponential increase of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere to be the key argument for legitimizing the claims of this new geological epoch.

Their conclusion goes as follows:

“without major catastrophes like an enormous volcanic eruption, an unexpected epidemic, a large-scale nuclear war, an asteroid impact, a new ice age, or continued plundering of Earth’s resources by partially still primitive technology [...] mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come.”<sup>8</sup>

As stated above, the first stage of my argument consists in a *critical dissection of the Anthropocene as “discourse”* (in the Foucaultean sense of the word)<sup>9</sup>, namely the acknowledgment that this aspirant geological epoch equates to a “threshold concept,”<sup>10</sup> or better an ambiguous idea, as it presents certain ideological features hidden under neutral statements by virtue of their scientific grounds. In its essence, and well beyond the intentions of its promoters – the “Anthropocenologists”<sup>11</sup> – the Anthropocene emerges less as a scientific concept than as “the ideational underpinning for a particular worldview”, even as an ideology or “a paradigm dressed as epoch.”<sup>12</sup> As Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz argue, *l’Événement Anthropocène* establishes a new *grand récit*, where the human being recounts and confirms its power within “a hegemonic system for representing the world as a totality to be governed”.<sup>13</sup>

According to Jeremy Baskin, author of a brief but inspiring paper on this topic, the Anthropocene as paradigm/ideology presents four basic consequences: “First, it universalizes and normalizes a certain portion of humanity as the human of the Anthropocene. Second, it reinserts ‘man’ into nature only to re-elevate ‘him’ within and above it. Third, its use of ‘instrumental reason’ generates a largely uncritical embrace of technology. And, fourth, it legitimises certain non-democratic and technophilic approaches.”<sup>14</sup>

Given my basic agreement with Baskin’s analysis (an approach we could call *Critical Anthropocene*), the Anthropocene emerges in my interpretation as an ideology or *Weltanschauung* because of its *epistemic ambiguity*, that is because it introduces evaluative (prescriptive) statements disguised as neutral (descriptive) by way of their scientific matrix. In this regard, I affirm that the ideological character of the Anthropocene depends on the fact that it uncritically embraces an ‘epochal evidence’, namely the complete and definitive *naturalization of technology*. The normative/prescriptive element of this aspirant geological epoch lies in its unconditional, ‘natural’ acceptance of the metamorphosis of *techne* (i.e. the artificial dimension) into *physis* (i.e. the natural dimension). In other words: within the present-day historical configuration, technology has taken on such a pervasive role that the only way it can be properly perceived is to interpret it as being nature itself. That is to say, as being *physis* (nature), or *kosmos* (order), or *holon* (totality).

<sup>8</sup> Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, 18.

<sup>9</sup> See Crist 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See Clark 2015.

<sup>11</sup> This critical definition by Fressoz & Bonneuil (2016, 49) identifies the leading figures of the so-called “Good Anthropocene” as those with a strongly optimistic approach to this new epoch. Included in this group, among others, are: David Keith, Mark Lynas, Erle Ellis, Andrew Revkin, Christian Schwägerl, the Ecomodernists and the members of the Breakthrough Institute of Oakland (CA).

<sup>12</sup> Baskin 2015, 9. With regard to the word “ideology”, I use it to mean “a system of widely shared ideas, patterned beliefs, guiding norms and values, and lofty ideals accepted as “fact” or “truth” by significant groups in society [...] ideologies offer individuals a more or less coherent picture of the world not only as it is but also as it should be (Steger 2009, 6).

<sup>13</sup> Bonneuil & Fressoz 2016, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Baskin 2015, 11.

However, looking at this metamorphosis more closely, it turns out to be the effect of an additional cause. *Techne* can be interpreted as *physis* only because it has previously and surreptitiously replaced *physis* in both meaning and function. This means that that particular *physis*, which relates *techne* to itself, has already been converted according to technological parameters. “Nature and Culture [Technology] are now unified, but under the rule of Culture [Technology].”<sup>15</sup> The metamorphosis of *techne* in *physis* (the naturalization of technology) emerges therefore as an epiphenomenon in relation to the main phenomenon – which I call the *anthropocenic Urphänomen*, according to the Goethean meaning of the word – consisting in the *preliminary metamorphosis of physis in techne* (the technologization of nature), namely in that long process of de-physization and de-cosmization of nature that characterizes all of modernity. On this basis, we can consider the Anthropocene as the *redde rationem* of modernity, that is the moment in which the de-cosmization of nature finds its complete realization.

According to Baskin, the Anthropocene presents “a dual movement” in relation to nature. First, “deprived of exteriority, agency and otherness, nature is de-natured and we are held [...] to be after or beyond nature”. Second, humanity is “re-inserted into ‘nature’ only to simultaneously be elevated within and above it”. As a consequence, the only vision left available to us is that of a “Technature”<sup>16</sup>, i.e. a “physics without *physis* and a nature without *logos*”<sup>17</sup>. In the context of the Anthropocene, nature is perceived, conceived and made use of in entirely technological terms. As Crutzen himself affirms, in a statement which represents a perfect synthesis of the ideological spirit at the basis of the Anthropocene: with the advent of this new epoch “it’s no longer us against nature,” but only because now “nature is us.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, within this new framework we can finally respect the otherness of nature, but only because such an otherness becomes (i.e., we make it) nothing.

## 2. Pet-tification of Nature, Aidosean Prometheanism and the Paradox of Omniresponsibility

On the basis of these assumptions, I would now like to emphasize a specific situation that in my view represents an interesting, maybe the most interesting, peculiarity of the Anthropocene from an ethical-philosophical perspective.

The difficulty in keeping all the different aspects emerging in this unprecedented framework together (that is: exponential growth of technology, economic development, ecological anxieties...) produces, in the end, a *substantial metamorphosis in the images of human being and nature*, and in their relation as well. Within this brand new epochal box, the human being leaves its traditional role as the *lord* of a nature conceived as *object* or “*standing-reserve*” (I refer here to Heidegger’s idea of *Bestand*)<sup>19</sup> and takes on that of “*Steward of the Earth System*” or “*Planetary Manager*”<sup>20</sup> of a nature conceived as *living being* (see James Lovelock’s *Gaia hypothesis*, for instance).<sup>21</sup> More precisely, nature becomes a kind of *pet*<sup>22</sup>: something living, but entirely dependent on us – that is, on our

<sup>15</sup> Id., 18.

<sup>16</sup> Schwägerl 2014, 127-149.

<sup>17</sup> Löwith 1986, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Crutzen & Schwägerl 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger 1977, 17.

<sup>20</sup> See Steffen & Crutzen *et al.* 2011a. Steffen and Crutzen define the “Earth System” as “the suite of interacting physical, chemical and biological global-scale cycles and energy fluxes that provide the life-support system for life at the surface of the planet [...] the Earth System includes humans, our societies, and our activities; thus, humans are not an outside force perturbing an otherwise natural system but rather an integral and interacting part of the Earth System itself” (Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill 2007, 615).

<sup>21</sup> See Lovelock 2000.

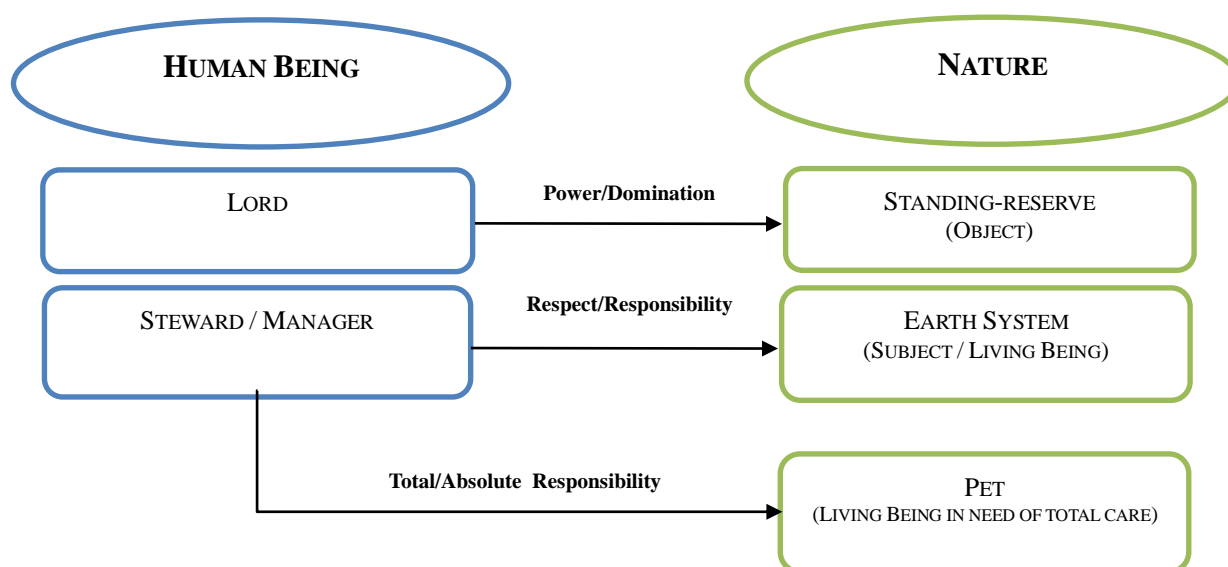
<sup>22</sup> To avoid misunderstanding, I must make clear that I am referring here to the idea of *pet* in its so-called “hard version”. More precisely, I mean that kind of human-animal relation in which the human being completely annihilates the animality (i.e. the difference/otherness) of a pet. In my view the paradigmatic image of this *hard pet-tification* is the beauty contest for dogs. I think and hope that we can soon acknowledge the same

capability to take care of it – and thus something for which we must feel *totally, absolutely responsible*. As Jonas himself affirms:

“It is his [man’s] excess of power that confers this duty on him, and it is against this very power [...] that his protection is asked. Thus, it comes about that technology, this coldly pragmatic work of human cunning, installs man in a role which only religion has sometimes assigned to him: that of *steward or guardian of creation*.”<sup>23</sup>

The coming of the Anthropocene produces therefore a significant change in the image of nature, which from a warehouse of exploitable resources turns into a pet, that is a living entity we must take care of. As a result, the basic relationship between human being and nature is no longer characterized by power/domination, but rather by respect/responsibility. I define this phenomenon the *Pet-tification of Nature*.

#### ANTHROPOCENIC METAMORPHOSIS OF HUMAN BEING AND NATURE (PET-TIFICATION OF NATURE)



The surprising ethical ambiguity emerging from this new situation depends on the fact that the stewardship of the Earth System – i.e., our caretaking of the planetary pet – equates to an “active planetary management” that could become, among other things, an extensive *geoengineering* program. One of the most incisive and controversial examples of this program is the “artificially adding aerosols” into the stratosphere as a solution to global warming.<sup>24</sup> This kind of remedy against climate change and the ecological crisis in general is strongly promoted by the ecomodernists and other exponents of the so-called *Good* (or even *Great*) *Anthropocene*.<sup>25</sup> That such a solution is even proposed is sufficient to show the spirit of the Stewardship/Management of the Earth System, which can be expressed by the following formula: he/she who feels the

indifference (cruelty, violence) toward the other in this manifestation that we now acknowledge in circus animals.

<sup>23</sup> Jonas 1982, 894-895 (italics mine).

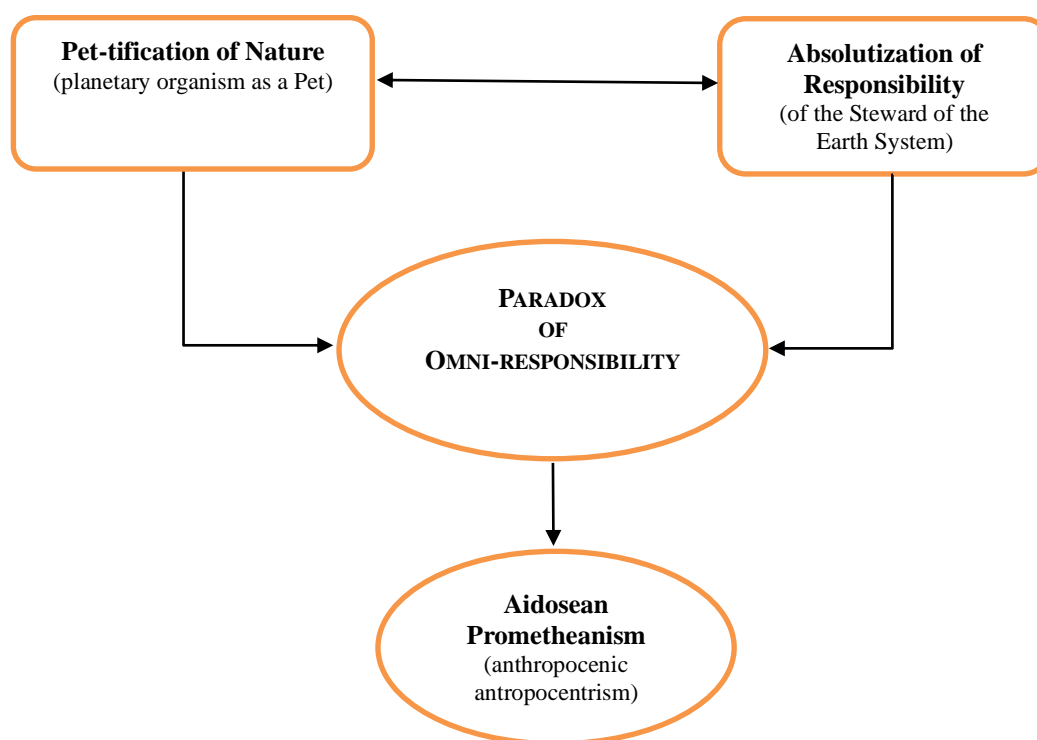
<sup>24</sup> Steffen & Crutzen *et al.* 2011b, 858. On this topic see also Baskin 2019.

<sup>25</sup> See note 11.

burden of total/absolute responsibility also feels the obligation (the moral imperative) to *fully* exercise it. In other words, the human being’s only potential fault within this new epochal framework corresponds to a *lack of responsibility*, which in turn amounts to abstention, i.e. non-intervention. The only guilt still valid in the age of total responsibility is the *lack of agency*.

The combination of the Pet-tification of nature (i.e. the characterization of the planetary organism as a pet) and the Absolutization of the Steward of the Earth System’s responsibility generates the *Ethical Paradox of Omni-Responsibility*. On the basis of its moral and/or ecological duty of total caretaking of its own environment (that is, a situation in which the technological capability to make something becomes *ipso facto* moral obligation to do so), the human being gives birth to a *Neo-Prometheanism* – that is, a *new form of anthropocentrism* – which beneath the surface is no less problematic than the traditional one.

#### AN ETHICAL PARADOX



Furthermore, as already affirmed by Jonas, it is precisely the exponential growth of our power (*Macht*) as technological agents that produced an evolution of the traditional idea on anthropocentrism.

“That widened scope of human power, as it breaches the horizon spatiotemporal neighbourhood, also breaks down the anthropocentric monopoly of most former ethical systems, religious and secular [...] Man was seen beholden to mankind, at the very most, and to nothing else on this earth [...] but now the whole biosphere of the planet [...] claims its share of the respect owed to all that is an end in itself – that is: to all that is alive.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Jonas 1982, 894.

In the age in which “technology is destiny”, ethics should not be merely interhuman, but intergenerational. And given its intergenerational horizon, which consists in defending the right of future generations to exist (a right put at risk precisely by our technological development), now the object of ethics must be our *oikos*, namely the environment itself, the whole planet. “Technology extends man’s responsibility to the future of life on earth.”<sup>27</sup> Here and now, our responsibility is a *cosmic responsibility*.

On the basis of the cosmic duty that now burdens humankind, namely insofar as the Anthropocene establishes the transition of human being from ruler/lord over nature (i.e. nature conceived as object) to Steward of the Earth System (i.e. nature conceived as subject), we could consider it as the age in which the word “anthropocentrism” loses its traditional negative connotation and acquires a new, potentially positive one. That is to say, this label may no longer identify the blind egoism of a single species at the expense of the framework that accommodates it (i.e. the environment, the ecosystem), but the awareness of that same species of the authentic extent of its behaviour. As a consequence, the natural *pendant* of anthropocentrism would cease to be *hybris* (i.e. arrogance) and become *ananke*, namely necessity, responsibility and even moral duty. The latter would correspond to our duty to take care of (= manage) the world organism for which we have become entirely responsible.

It is precisely with this anthropocentric anthropocentrism’s sheer difference and peculiarity that my approach begins to distance itself from Baskin’s, Bonneuil & Fressoz’s and the other scholars who have inspired it. In fact, these authors see little more than a revival of classical anthropocentrism in this new epoch.

In this respect, a partial exception is represented by Clive Hamilton, who proposes one of the most interesting philosophical readings of the anthropocenic question, and who dedicates particular attention to the topic of anthropocentrism. Hamilton claims that the authentic idea of the Anthropocene – that is, a “rupture in Earth and human history”<sup>28</sup> – can only emerge within an adequate epistemic horizon, that is, one provided by the development of a “new scientific paradigm”: the *Earth System Science*.

“The new Earth System thinking that emerged fully in the 1990s and 2000s is the integrative meta-science of the whole planet understood as a unified, complex, evolving system beyond the sum of its parts. It is a transdisciplinary and holistic approach [...] It represents a markedly novel way of thinking about the Earth that supersedes ecological thinking.”<sup>29</sup>

Among the results produced by this new approach is a *new anthropocentrism*, namely a potentially “humble anthropocentrism” in contrast to an “arrogant” or “monstrous anthropocentrism.”<sup>30</sup> Hamilton affirms:

“The competing forces of the power of humans to disrupt the Earth System and the uncontrollable powers of nature unleashed in the Anthropocene give rise to what I call ‘the new anthropocentrism’. I will argue that humankind became a unified entity – the *anthropos* – for the first time only in the second half of the twentieth century, and as such has become the central agent on a new kind of Earth [...] The philosophical anthropocentrism I develop diverges from the anthropo-supremacism that brought us the ecological crisis.”<sup>31</sup> The obvious outcome of this new anthropocentrism is that “we now have a *responsibility* for the Earth as a whole and pretending otherwise is itself irresponsible.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Id., 895.

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton 2007, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Id., 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ib., 39.

<sup>31</sup> Ib., 42.

<sup>32</sup> Ib., 39 (italics mine).

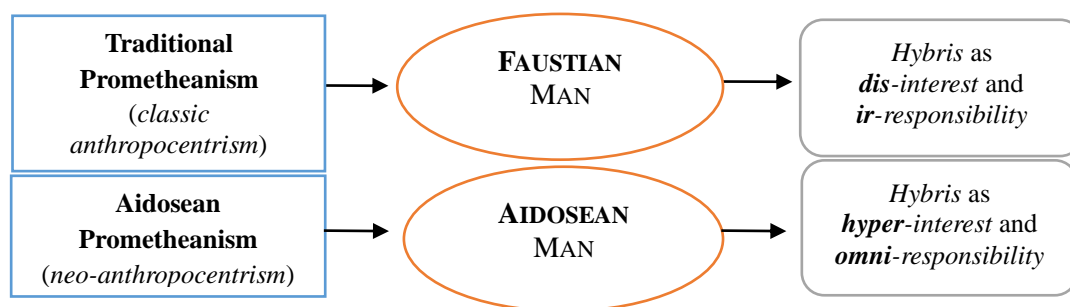
Hamilton considers it a “pre-ethical sense of responsibility”, as “before our own welfare, our virtues, and our duties to one another, our inescapable responsibility for the Earth defines us as moral beings.”<sup>33</sup> The new anthropocentrism “emphasizes the unique responsibility of humans to protect the Earth and, above all, avoid dangerous disruption of the Earth System [...] This is the *silent duty of Prometheus*.”<sup>34</sup>

As said, my reading of the Anthropocene as epochal framework also involves a new form of anthropocentrism. In my view, however, differently from Hamilton’s, the natural outcome of this new anthropocentrism is represented by an ethical paradox. In other words, such a paradox is not an accident but a direct consequence of man’s responsibility toward the Earth System once this responsibility becomes technically capable of realizing its ambition of total caretaking. More precisely, I think we have *two different kinds of Prometheanisms* or anthropocentrisms in the Anthropocene<sup>35</sup>.

1) On the one hand, we have *traditional Prometheanism* (i.e., the *classic anthropocentrism*), the outcome of a *Faustian man* who sees himself as the lord/subject of a nature conceived as object or standing-reserve. In this case, the relationship between human being and nature is characterized by power and domination, and the Promethean *hybris* is thus the result of *dis-interest* and *ir-responsibility* towards the otherness of nature.

2) On the other hand, we have *anthropocenic* or *neo-Prometheanism* (i.e., a *neo-anthropocentrism*), which is the outcome of an *Aidosean man* (after *Aidos*, the Greek goddess of shame, modesty and humility). The *Aidosean Man* is he who ‘only’ considers himself a steward/manager of nature conceived as living being. However, as stated above, this living being is also considered to be incapable of looking after itself, that is in permanent need of total care. In this second case, the relationship between human being and nature is characterized by respect and responsibility, and the Promethean *hybris* that emerges is thus the paradoxical result of *hyper-interest* and *omni-responsibility* towards the otherness of nature. It therefore represents a classic case of heterogony of ends. *Aidosean Prometheanism* emerges as the true face of the “silent duty of Prometheus”, the real way in which Prometheus hastens to Gaia’s assistance.

#### THE TWO PROMETHEANISMS/ANTHROPOCENTRISMS



The paradigmatic example of such a reification of the other by virtue of an excess of care/responsibility is the pet (in its “hard version”). The idea of pet equates to a totally domesticated animal, namely the *total negation of its animality (otherness)*, of its

<sup>33</sup> *Ib.*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> *Ib.*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> As early as 1999 the German physicist Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, a pioneer *ante litteram* of the Good Anthropocene, had suggested a “neo-promethean” solution to what he called “the second Copernican revolution”. This solution can be summarized in the following question: “Why should Prometheus not hasten to Gaia’s assistance?” (Schellnhuber 1999, 23).



being *per se*, as it is reduced entirely to its being *per me* in the form of an entity in permanent need of care. *Pet represents the embodiment of my need to caretake*. According to this approach, one could affirm that the *entelechia* of “pet form” (i.e. its complete realization and full exhibition) is the *tamagotchi*: the electronic artificial pet toy created in Japan in the mid-nineties. This gadget perfectly embodies the spirit of what I mean by (hard) Pet-tification. In *tamagotchi*'s case, indeed, the substance is fully eclipsed by the function, animal's animality is completely denied (even in its physical, material consistency) insofar as it is reduced to an object of care, to its “need” for being looked after and protected by another's responsibility (that of the “owner”). *Tamagotchi* is the perfect/ideal pet because it is nothing but the projection of the human need to caretake.

### 3. Between responsibility and releasement: The taste of the other(ness)

To begin the final stage of this paper, I would like to make explicit *two key issues of my argument*.

1) The first is my idea of “*Omni-responsibility*”, which I will clarify by way of a comparison to Jonas's arguments. In the third chapter (titled: *Theory of Responsibility: Parent and Statesman as Eminent Paradigms*) of the fourth part (*The Good, the “Ought”, and Being: A Theory of Responsibility*) of his masterpiece *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979),<sup>36</sup> Jonas draws a parallel between private and public responsibility, between the paradigm cases of the parent's responsibility for the infant and that of the statesman for their citizens. These are two “*eminent paradigms*” of a *total responsibility*. In particular, he claims that the “*timeless archetype of all responsibility*”<sup>37</sup> is that of a parent for their child.

By “*omni-responsibility*” I mean the evolution of this *total responsibility* towards an *absolute responsibility*. By “*absolute*” I intend its etymological meaning, from the Latin *absolutus*, past participle of the verb *absolvere* “to set free”, “make separate”. This kind of responsibility considers itself absolved (just by virtue of its noble intentions) from any consideration/respect towards the otherness of its “object”. The *omni-responsibility* is a responsibility that, precisely due to its moral duty of total caretaking of the other, becomes *blind to the otherness*, i.e., *blind to the difference*. So, paradoxically, the *absolute responsibility* (i.e. a responsibility which is concretely/technologically able to realize all its aspirations) emerges as the anteroom of the *property*, namely that kind of relationship whereby the otherness of the other is completely denied. The risk is therefore that once become absolute, our current cosmic responsibility could turn into a *totalitarian responsibility*, namely give birth to a *totalitarianism of responsibility*.

With reference to Jonas's paradigmatic example, one can argue that an *omni-responsible parent* (i.e. absolute and not only total responsible parent) equates to the figure known in Italian as “*padre padrone*” (father-master).<sup>38</sup> Our everyday experience, in particular that of our closest and strongest relations, teaches us that the dark side of responsibility/caretaking – i.e. its unspeakable goal and the temptation it must seek to resist – lies in taking possession of the other.

2) The second key issue of my argument that I would like to make explicit is that the real subjectivity of the Anthropocene as worldview/ideology is not to be found either in nature (as *physis*, *oikos*, environment, Earth System, vital space...) or the human being (as lord or steward or manager of nature), but rather in technology as such. Indeed it is precisely *technology* – here conceived not as the sum or addition of single technologies, but rather as *epochal phenomenon*, that is as synthesis between *disenchantment* (*Entzauberung*) and *rationalization* (*Rationalisierung*), under the imperative of

<sup>36</sup> Jonas 1985, 125 ss.

<sup>37</sup> Id., 130.

<sup>38</sup> This is the title of Gavino Ledda's famous novel *Padre Padrone* (see Ledda 1979), as well as the Taviani brother's film of the same name, adapted from the novel (winner of the *Palme d'or* at Cannes in 1977).

*makeability (Machbarkeit)* – that transforms our traditional *utopian ambitions* into *concrete possibilities*, and finally these possibilities into *real obligations*. Within this new historical singularity the possibility turns into cogency and destiny. *Possibilitas* becomes *potestas*, *Möglichkeit* becomes *Macht*. According to “Gabor’s Law”, formulated by Günther Anders and Jacques Ellul: “*what can be made, must be made*”<sup>39</sup>. More precisely, the possibility (*Können*) of making (something) becomes necessity (*Sollen*) of making (something) and, at last, obligation (*Müssen*) not to refrain from making (something).

Given this assumption, I think that the best definition for this aspirant new epoch is not *Anthropo-cene* but *Techno-cene*,<sup>40</sup> as in its essence it does not correspond to the “*Menschenzeit*” (Age of Humans) or the Age of “Human Turn”,<sup>41</sup> but rather to what philosophical thought has called “*technisches Zeitalter*” (the age of technology) or “*technologische Zivilisation*” (technological age). In my view the Anthropocene equates to the epoch in which “technology is destiny”, namely in which it becomes the “subject of history”, and that of nature, too (although of a de-natured nature, i.e. a Technature).

The main consequence of the Anthropocene/Technocene is to be found in the Pet-tification of Nature, namely the metamorphosis of the idea/image of nature, which, from an object/standing-reserve (i.e. *something* to be exploited) turns into a pet (i.e. ‘someone’ needing total/absolute care). This consideration suggests that *the Anthropocene as Weltanschauung undermines Jonas’s imperative/principle responsibility as ethical standard* for the ecological (and more generally philosophical) thought of recent decades. If this imperative has been the cornerstone of an “ethics for the technological age”,<sup>42</sup> it probably cannot play the same role in the rising anthropocenic/technocenic age.

What I tried to emphasize in this paper is that the challenges of the contemporary age – first of all, the ecological crisis – are so new and wide-ranging that their eventual concrete solution (i.e. according to the problem solving pattern/scheme) may not be enough. That is to say: the solution to the ecological *problems* does not mean the solution to ecological *question*, namely the anthropocenic/technocenic *question*.<sup>43</sup> For instance, if some critical points concerning the ecological crisis were to be solved by means of a further increase in our technological agency (I am thinking of the already mentioned geoengineering), then this solution would cause a set of worrying consequences on other levels. As stated above, on the ethical stage we could have the paradox of the Omni-responsibility, namely a totalitarianism of responsibility as a synthesis between a new and more insidious form of mortification of natural otherness (i.e. the Pet-tification of nature) and a new and more insidious form of anthropocentrism (i.e. Aidosean Prometheanism).

As the age of our absolute (i.e. total and potentially totalitarian) responsibility, the Anthropocene represents the limit case where such a principle/imperative – precisely because it can be integrally actualized – unknowingly becomes the instrument of a new form of anthropocentrism. The “silent duty of Prometheus”, the embrace between Prometheus and Gaia gives birth to an Aidosean Prometheanism. This means that from an ethical point of view the most urgent request of our age is that we acknowledge the *limit of responsibility*, namely the possibly dangerous consequences of our best intentions when they become *completely/entirely makeable*. It is important to remark that within this new epochal framework the technological capability to make something

<sup>39</sup> Anders 1992, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Though in a different way (and without attributing particular importance to it), the term “Technocene” appears in Hornborg 2015. An entirely occasional use of this word can also be found in Sloterdijk 2015, 328 and Nancy 2015, 87.

<sup>41</sup> See Schwägerl 2014, 127-149 and Raffnsøe 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Jonas 1985, 1.

<sup>43</sup> With “problem” I mean that kind of interrogation which allows only *solution* as its possible answer. And with “solution” I mean that kind of answer which completely annihilates its own interrogation. On the other side, with “question” I mean a kind of interrogation, whose answer can also be something different from a solution, that is an answer which keeps alive, leaves open its own interrogation.

becomes *ipso facto* moral obligation to do so, that is technology becomes a kind of *ethical transcendental*, the condition of possibility for the ethics itself.

As a consequence of our understanding of the limit of responsibility, our age demands that we become aware of a brand new ethical problem, that is *the potential aporia between the responsibility for the other and the respect of its otherness*, namely of the fact that no authentic "Verantwortung" (responsibility) is possible without "Gelassenheit" (releasement).<sup>44</sup> The acknowledgment of this aporia as a new ethical challenge could also show us the first stage for its overcoming, namely the first philosophical step towards the building of an ethical/moral paradigm good enough for this brand new epoch. This first step could correspond to an *encounter between Verantwortung and Gelassenheit* (between responsibility and releasement), that is a *renewed ethical dialogue between Hans Jonas and Martin Heidegger*. Releasement represents the fundamental guarantee of the Difference, i.e. of the Otherness, which in turn represents the condition of possibility for every Responsibility.

As a conclusion, we can enounce the basic rule of this encounter/dialog in its two potential versions, that is:

1) *The limit that every caretaking/responsibility has to accept is the safeguard of the otherness of the other* (in particular, with reference to nature), letting it be (releasing it) in its *per se*.

2) *The authentic responsibility must be able to acknowledge and preserve the value of the difference as irreplaceable epiphany of otherness*, since the only reliable measure of our responsibility is our "taste for the Other(ness)".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Heidegger 1966.

<sup>45</sup> Here I wanted to evoke a beautiful film by Agnes Jaoui by paraphrasing its title: *Le Goût des autres* (2000), an extremely useful instruction manual for human relationships.

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