

Perspective

Reviving Philosophical Anthropology for the Age of Extinction

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that the discipline of Philosophical Anthropology is directly relevant for comprehending the present human condition, especially regarding our collective ecological predicament and the consequences of climate change. By centralizing relations, focusing on lived experience at various levels, and adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Philosophical Anthropology provides powerful conceptual instruments for making sense of human–biosphere relations. Its focus on explaining the human condition in an antireductionist fashion, emphasizing biological and chemical processes and multiple lifeforms, is a valuable approach. These approaches are critically examined with refers to the works of Scheler, Gehlen, and Plessner, combined with a discussion of the concept of responsivity. This theoretical foundation resonates with current trends in anthropology, environmental philosophy, 4E cognition, and ecocriticism, allowing for greater appreciation of the embeddedness of organisms and the agency of non-human actors, as well as of emotional responses such as eco-anxiety and solastalgia. By integrating results from philosophy, anthropology, the exact sciences, and life sciences, a reinvigorated PA could well provide the conceptual and methodological foundation for a comprehensive theory of the Age of Extinction.

Keywords: Philosophical Anthropology; Ecology; Anthropocene; Ecocriticism; Nonhuman agency; Environmental philosophy; Symbiocene; Solastalgia

1. Introduction

The thinking paradigm of “Philosophical Anthropology” had its heyday in the period starting around 1928 to the middle of the 1970s. Originating in the German-speaking part of Europe, it was firmly embedded in the questions and issues that shaped German cultural life during the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries. Building on and synthesizing late 19th century discoveries in evolutionary biology, the emerging humanities, debates in existentialist philosophy, and philosophy of life alike, it formulated a unique research agenda. Many debates that demarcated this discipline have been unduly ignored, although a partial resurgence of interest in the work of Helmuth Plessner is evident [1]. Initially, philosophical anthropology was concerned with the question “what is the human being”? Granted, this question had also been asked by disciplines such as theology or the sciences. In many cases, the answers were reductionistic, delimiting the human being to overtly materialistic or religious explanations. Notions like *homo ludens*, *homo faber*, *homo economicus*, etc. are mere abstractions from an essentially richer way of being [2].



These attempts at reductively defining the human being led to the recognition that human beings are fundamentally self-shaping (*Selbstgestaltend*), including their thoughts, minds, actions, and attitudinal dispositions [3–7]. This realization undermined the very idea of a “final theory of the human”. Simply put, how is it possible to formulate a final theory if the subject keeps reinventing itself? The point of departure for Philosophical Anthropology seems to have been that to be creative was constitutive of human beings, and that the anthropological research method had to embrace this fact.

Another notion that the major thinkers in this 20th century tradition formulated is relevant as ever: they viewed the human being not just as creative, but also as fundamentally excentric, disjointed or displaced, and therefore as irremediably cultural, even to the degree that this culture would be humanity’s “second nature”. The creativity ascribed to human beings implied also that they could view themselves as agents in the world, and as such were always curiously “displaced”.

Considering the relevance of Philosophical Anthropology for the present, we may start with a straightforward observation: the ecological circumstances of the 19th century exhibit some striking parallels with the present. The Industrial Revolution was still underway in Europe, with a range of environmental and socio-political effects. Natural environments were dramatically changed or were irreversibly damaged; urban areas multiplied in size; the apocalyptic belief in the heat death of the universe became scientific mainstream; the modern *polis* and the associated uncanniness of modernity became entrenched in the collective psyche; the unconscious was postulated as a hidden cause of anxieties, neuroses, and phobias.

It does not require much imagination to identify the parallels with the present. Industrialization occurs everywhere on the globe; the ecosystemic integrity of the Earth weakens; natural habitats are fragmented or destroyed; the collective psyche must deal with ecosystemic destruction on a global scale; climate change impact communities around the globe; digital technology puts human cognition and its place in the cosmos in question. Postmodern relativism has failed to formulate a coherent philosophical research paradigm to conceptualize the present, leaving room for a reinvigorated anthropology to “make sense” of the present and future.

This timeframe has been called the Holocene extinction or the “Age of Extinction” [8,9]. Simultaneously, there have been other characterizations, ranging from Anthropocene to Ecocene and Symbiocene, even veering into the ominous, like Chtulhucene or even Cyanocene [10–12]. It seems hardly contrary to characterize the early 21st century as a time in which humanity as a planetary force becomes increasingly aware of its own impact on the biosphere. As the time between unfolding events and their communication around the globe becomes almost instant, cause and effect can be immediately linked. We might even view this shortened feedback loop as a form of environmental input. Mediated by visual and digital culture, a ceaseless series of inputs communicates the state of the planet.

What can Philosophical Anthropology contribute to the “Age of Extinction”? What constitutes its relevance for the present and the future, alongside empirical anthropological and scientific approaches? To answer this question, I analyze how the original anthropological philosophers framed their anthropological approaches in response to the issues of their own time. Then, I relate their ideas to our present situation, showing how their concerns are still urgent, and how they provide a new application for Philosophical Anthropology. That is, an anthropological approach that resonates with their interests, methodological innovations, and aims, yet fully adapted and relevant for the present. As a preliminary remark, I would like to draw attention to the fact that while humans produce anthropology, its scope of inquiry is not limited to humans and human activity. Indeed, one of the lessons that the current, human-induced waves of extinction highlight is the fact that non-human actors—whether substances, animals, bacteria, fungi, or chemical compounds—play decisive roles in how humanity conceptualizes its role in the world. To leave the solution of the climate crisis and its associated ecological destruction to the sciences alone is to downplay and underestimate the role that anthropology can play.

In particular, the Protagorean conception of “man as the measure of all things” invented and developed the technology that caused our current ecological predicament in the first place. It requires a different and broadened form of thought that ventures beyond the technocratic mindset to solve the problems caused by its widespread application. To develop such forms of thinking, anthropology needs to re-examine the place of humanity in the cosmos—maximally broadly defined to include a host of non-human actors—and embracing a methodological anti-reductionism. The approach explored by the classical thinkers of Philosophical Anthropology provides the conceptual toolkit to accomplish this shift in thinking. To avail ourselves of the possibilities that these tools offer, critical engagement with its original resources is needed, taking the best of what it has to offer on board to nurture new forms of thinking and ultimately relating to the world.

1.1. Methodology and Structure

First, I examine several structural similarities in the philosophical anthropologies of Max Scheler (1874–1928), Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976), and Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985). In Section 1.2, I list four points of Philosophical Anthropology, conceived as a thinking paradigm.

Section 2 is a synoptic overview of their philosophical-anthropological context and the themes that Scheler, Gehlen, and Plessner inherited from the past, summarized in four points. This examination segues into a critical discussion of their theoretical assumptions, highlighting limitations and possibilities. In Section 3, I discuss the notion of *responsivity* as a core concept to think about Philosophical Anthropology. In Section 4, I will introduce a new framework for practicing Philosophical Anthropology in the Age of Extinction by revisiting and expanding on the four points introduced in Section 1.2. Section 4 highlights the contours of a new and invigorated version of Philosophical Anthropology for application in the fields of eco-criticism, ecology, and posthumanism.

The comparative overview in Section 2 focuses on three key works: Scheler’s *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (1928), Plessner’s *The Stages of Organic Life and the Human* (1928), and Gehlen’s *Man: His Nature and Place in the Cosmos* (1940). Each of these three authors wrote extensively, and all three works count as seminal in the debate. When appropriate, I will refer to other writings of these authors, their progenitors and contemporaries, but the comparison is limited to these three main works.

A note on terminology: Philosophical Anthropology (PA, written with capitals) is not a philosophical way of reflecting on anthropology. Neither is it a subdiscipline of anthropology, like cultural anthropology or cognitive anthropology.

1.2. The Core of Philosophical Anthropology in Four Points

PA is a distinct *theoretical paradigm* in philosophy, the core tenets of which are summarized in points I–IV:

- I. *Centralizing relations.* PA concerns itself with the “human place in the cosmos” at various levels, starting from the idea that an organism is positively and negatively defined by its boundaries. Typically, these boundaries are viewed as porous, allowing for natural and cultural exchanges between organisms and their environments. It follows that PA does not start with metaphysical presuppositions about the human being, but rather seeks to establish conceptual relations with the natural, social, or cultural sciences [5,13] (p. 155). The organism itself is not viewed as a simple entity, but as a complex of interlocking functions, processes, and phenomena that operate across varying levels of complexity.
- II. *Adaptable and interdisciplinary approach.* PA asks the question: “What is the human being?” not from a comparative or critical viewpoint. It combines the core insight of Kant’s transcendental idealism—viz. that our cognitive access to the world is always mediated—combined with a critical inclusion of new empirical advances in biology, ecology and genomics. Consequently, it recognizes that the question “what is the human being?” cannot be answered by reducing the human to the findings of any individual science or by claiming to have found some “hidden essence of the human being. The nature

of the human being must be approached from the human being conceived as an embedded totality—including “the entire radius of existence and of nature” [13,14] (pp. 4–12) [15] (p. 24). Consequently, the findings of various sciences are incorporated into a theoretical edifice that is open-textured, interdisciplinary, and capable of integrating new findings and conceptions. From this receptive attitude, it comes as no surprise that PA is easily compatible with so-called “4E” accounts of cognition [16]. Although anthropology has recently broadened its scope to consider the human population, classical PA initially focused on the individual. Although all classical thinkers extended their scope to politics and societies later on, this study is focused on their early works.

- III. *Focus on lived experience on all levels.* PA concerns itself with one of the readily available phenomena which all human beings share: the *experience of experiencing* [15] (p. 271) [17] (p. 111). So, PA does not presuppose a philosophical or anthropological viewpoint that one must accept first. The order of explanation starts at the level of bodily experience, only then to expand towards progressively larger areas of application, with the structure of the cosmos as the terminus. PA is an *Erfahrungswissenschaft* (experiential science) [13,17] (p. 151) [18]. That is, it seeks to build bridges between experiences that all human beings can (bodily, emotively, affectively) relate to, and using these to advance to generalizable descriptions about the human condition. By approaching the question in this manner, the subjective and objective poles of experience and science are brought into a new dialogue. This connection is established by distinguishing in the body as a lived entity (*Leib*) and biophysical unity (*Körper*) [19]. Or, if one moves one conceptual level up, the distinction between drives and instincts (*Triebe, Instinkt*) and the capacity for self-consciously selecting courses of action through the Will (*Wille*), acting (*Handlung*), or world-openness (*Weltoffenheit*).
- IV. *Resituating the subject-object-relation.* The move discussed in (III) also displaces and resituates the subject-object relation in its totality. PA rejected the naïve notion of a subject perceiving objects and held that this relation itself should be analyzed as a totality. Virtually all classical positions in phenomenology, *Lebensphilosophie*, and PA share this characteristic: they shift the subject-object relationship in such a way that one cannot entertain the thought that one looks from a distant, God’s eye viewpoint or “view from nowhere” at the world. To be certain, the emerging social sciences in the 19th century realized this as well, but PA adds a particular twist to the screw:

[T]he point of view that is generated internally and that, intentionally, establishes the subject-object relation, is placed outside of the body, so that the perception relation is observed at a distance—from an external vantage point [13] (p. 156).

The point is not to aim for a “view from nowhere”, but to situate the subject-object relation as a totality in an enveloping experiential field. Importantly, it is possible to intelligibly reason about what is observed in this field. Typically, the field in which the subject-object relation is resituated takes various forms, with Scheler adopting an approach that bears significant metaphysical overtones, and Plessner/Gehlen relying on a combined empiricist-philosophical methodology. Consequently, human beings are held to be constituted by the subject-object relationship and the ability to observe this relationship as a totality, thereby situating it. We do not just possess introspection but may also observe ourselves “from the outside” while we are “looking inward”, as it were.

2. Theorizing the Tension of Being

Scheler, Gehlen, and Plessner advanced their own theories on the tension of being. To be an organism amounts to being situated in a field of often opposing forces. In different ways, this thought is worked out in PA. All three authors responded to key debates that characterized German philosophy and humanities during the latter half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century.

First, the so-called “pessimism controversy”. Pessimism as a philosophical force marked German cultural life during the latter half of the 19th century, although its root causes remain unclear. It formed the backdrop of the emerging existentialist philosophy, which assumed its mature form in a relatively short

time in the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Julius Frauenstädt (1813–1879), Philip Mainländer (1841–1876), and Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906). The core question of 19th-century pessimism was whether life was worth living at all, a question which unsettled the philosophical establishment and cultural elites alike. In this cultural climate, Schopenhauer's idea of a cosmic Will or impulsion was reinterpreted by Freud, who relegated it—like many of his contemporaries, to the unconscious, turning it into the foundation for his theory of (sexual) drives and libidinal investment [20,21]. The newly discovered scientific idea that the universe would cease to exist because of ongoing natural processes lent credence to the notion of pessimism [22,23]. If the universe is moving inevitably towards its demise, what is life worth against this cosmic backdrop?

This discovery concluded a series of displacements of humanity. Copernicus and Galileo refuted the geocentric account of the universe. The Wallace-Darwin theory of evolution explained humanity as the outcome of a long evolutionary process. Biochemistry made emotions, moods, and affects explainable in terms of biochemical processes. Psychoanalysis located motivations and volitions in hidden drives emerging from the unconscious. Functionalism in modernism rejected the notions of an inner, aesthetic life in favor of the rationalization of everyday life. Existentialism stressed the meaninglessness of life, placing the burden on the individual. But the theory of the heat-death of the universe eclipsed all these displacements in its pessimistic overtones. Heidegger's existentialism emphasized *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) and *Dasein* (the existential awareness of one's individuality), and J.-P. Sartre's emphasis on the imperative to create meaning in a meaningless universe internalized this feeling of displacement [24,25]. Nowadays, the perspectivism built into poststructuralism continues this line of thinking, questioning the relevance of the individual perspective and emphasizing methodological relativism.

Second, during the 19th century, the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) gradually developed. This marked a reflexive turn in a scientific endeavor that had hitherto sought to explain the world but had given limited attention to the human being itself. Granted, Kant had lectured and written extensively on anthropology and had published his final statement on the matter in 1798 from a “pragmatic point of view [26]”. As he put it, anthropology was for him largely *Menschenkunde*—not a systematic science of the human being, but a practical science comparing the characteristics of various characters, temperaments, and nationalities, a theme that would influence 19th-century *Lebensphilosophie*. Likewise, Johann Gottfried von Herder compiled his ideas on the “philosophy of a history of humanity” around the same time, emphasizing universal aspects of the human condition, irrespective of culture or geographical location. This descriptive-comparative approach formed the foundation for anthropology and ethnology alike, and has sometimes been criticized for its emphasis on “collecting facts” as if the observer were not implicated in the observation.

The 19th-century tradition of hermeneutics provided a template for the humanities: the observer was not an onlooker, but a participant; and phenomena were not so much *observed as experienced*. One of the most influential proponents of hermeneutics in the 20th century—Hans-Georg Gadamer—made this aspect central to his approach: the humanities had to make sense of the world in real-time without the luxury of methodological distance (as the natural sciences claimed it had) or time (as history claimed it had) [27]. As Plessner puts it: while scientists could *observe* phenomena, the humanities had to *resonate* with them. The interpreter is always implicated in what is to be interpreted, and so the distance between observer and observed disappears [15] (pp. 12–13) [28].

Apart from the pessimism controversy and the formation of the emerging humanities, philosophy had to reckon with advances in biology and biochemistry. The idea of a *Wesensschau* became increasingly untenable. A purely philosophical description of the human condition was viewed as simplistic, as per point (II) above. Existentialism and phenomenology did not immediately integrate new biological facts about the human being, as they were focused on meaning and the nature of consciousness, respectively. The so-called “materialism controversy” and the rise of analytic philosophy both advocated a reductionist, scientific

approach to the human condition. The philosophical anthropologists rejected both extremes. They insisted on an interdisciplinary approach that incorporated breakthroughs in biology. They did so in a way that is anti-reductionist. The idea of the “modern synthesis” of Darwinian theory, in which the human being is reduced to a “survival machine”, would have been an alien concept to them, as it would reduce complexity to a simplistic picture.

The idea of the human being as embedded in larger natural, social, or cosmic structures permeated classical PA. For Scheler, this embeddedness was observable in the “position in the cosmos” that humanity occupied. His approach is dualistic: humanity is seen as subject to an impersonal Will or impulsion and the cultural quality of Spirit (*Geist*) [29,30] (pp. 35–40). While the Will represents a cosmic volition or motivation (such as reproductive drives, ambitions, or primary survival functions), it is essentially without a teleological endpoint, latching on to arbitrary objects. The cultural quality of Spirit is unable to motivate individuals but provides them with images or ideas that serve as attractors. Scheler’s idea is that once social contexts reach a certain level, the quality of Spirit permeates a society, enabling it to self-consciously shape its guiding images. The notion of an impersonal Will goes back to Schopenhauer’s *magnum opus* *The World as Will and Representation*, while the idea of an ascending and culturally expressed Spirit can be traced back to Hegel’s ideas in the *Phenomenology* [31,32].

The resulting picture is dynamic: Scheler recognizes the necessity for acting, adjusting expectations, gaining new skills, and imagining. Various cultural forms and organizations (like tribalism, feudalism, monarchy, democracy) can be traced back to a series of “images” or “self-conceptualizations” of human beings and their place in the cosmos. On Scheler’s account, the “ground of the world” or the most basic cause that explains the world as it appears remains unfinished. With this insight, Scheler distances himself from earlier essentialist anthropologies that tried to reduce humanity to the pinnacle of a divine creation, a thoroughly natural being, a political animal, or a biological machine. Due to being positioned between Will and Spirit, human nature is itself unfinished. As Gehlen would note, all kinds of attempts at describing it involve an arbitrary selection and are therefore doomed to fail as explanations [14] (p. 322).

Like Scheler, Gehlen postulated a gap between what human beings *are* and the kind of things they must *do* to survive. Given the absence of brute power, protective fur, or excessive hunting prowess, human beings are unspecialized creatures, and as such world-open (*Weltoffen*) [14] (p. 108). They rely on their brain’s intellectual power to orient themselves, as the world constitutes a “field of surprises” for them [14] (p. 122). The specialized animal is at home in its world due to its finely tuned physical adaptations, while human beings find themselves delivered over to it. For Gehlen, the human being is flawed, and its physical form falls short of naturally occupying its place in the world. This strange predicament generates an impulse towards cultururation. This feature marks human beings as unique—we are “naturally cultural” [14] (p. 108). We invent a “second nature” as our natural environment. This second nature (*i.e.*, culture) compensates for our shortcomings in the natural domain. So, cultural techniques like farming, architecture and art all contribute to survival by providing protection from natural factors. Yet, the imperative to act effectively remains. The measures we take to survive need to respond effectively to the circumstances. Knowledge and act are for Gehlen (following Scheler) fundamentally connected [29] (p. 58–59). To know is aimed at acting. From this viewpoint, Gehlen explains the human capacities to imagine, to know, and to act:

We represent the world in our consciousness. It is not restricted to the narrow realm of the here and now, to the perceivable; instead, in our consciousness, we exist in a spatiotemporal world which knows no boundaries and in which what we know is just as valuable as what we have experienced [14] (p. 293).

Recently, the philosopher Alphonso Lingis has raised a similar point:

Knowledge is not given to us in a sudden illumination of the mind; to know is to strive, to work. We learn that this chipped stone can serve to cut and to chop; that stone, blunted, can serve to

grind. [...] Once we see what we can do with a broken branch, a chipped stone, a bone or steel knife, we figure out what falling rocks, streaming water, and the roots of trees do by themselves [33] (p. 448).

Fundamentally, human beings are world-open (*Weltoffen*). Knowledge comes about through practice and the formation of theories about the world or environment in which we find ourselves. This trait supports survival: “By anticipating the future, the human being creates the conditions that enable him to survive in it [14] (p. 328)”. The consequence—rather Schopenhauerian—is unfulfillment: humanity cannot “act on instinct” alone. To survive, it requires impulses that are world-open and that can be controlled [14] (p. 334). Non-verbal thought is the medium that directs and orients the complex of ideas that are communicated and framed by capacities such as language and mathematics. The link between Scheler and Gehlen is dual: both emphasize that human action is an emergent phenomenon, manifesting itself once two phenomena intersect. For Scheler, these phenomena are basic Will-based impulsions and Spirit-generated images. For Gehlen, it is non-verbal thought operating on the capacity for language-use and conceptualization. These theories have the advantage that the whole of human behavior need not be reduced to a single feature or capacity that “explains it all”. Both theories point to the reflexivity involved in action: language, imagination, and mental imagery have tangible effects on the agent who produces them. Reflexivity places the human being beside itself: human beings can evaluate themselves and their action relative to the world or the images they have produced. If needed, action can be taken to close or minimize this gap. Put in Schopenhauer’s terms: it is the *representation of representation* [14] (p. 338) [31] (p. 70–71/§12). For Scheler and Gehlen, humans are caught between tensions or drives that move in different directions. This position generates a higher-level viewpoint by which human beings grasp or conceptualize their place in the world (for Gehlen) or the cosmos (for Scheler) [29] (pp. 62–66). In both cases, we deal with a displacement *within* the human being.

This fundamental displacement is the “basic category” of PA, especially so in the thought of Plessner [13]. However, we must first see what it is a displacement from. For Plessner, organic life is a relation of its body to its boundary [15] (p. 115). Plessner notes here something that Gehlen underestimated when he named the skin “unspecialized”. Through its interface, organisms engage in a range of transactions with their environment. We should notice that organic beings are plastic: they can reform, deform, grow, stretch... They can also respond, and Plessner specifically notes the pervasiveness of rhythm here: heartbeat, fluctuations of hormones, blood pressure, metabolic rates, Circadian rhythms... they are “key moments of life” [15] (pp. 116–117). These all occur in a body that posits itself over against an environment. The body exists in a *Gegenfeld* (opposing field) to which it must respond and which it requires for orientation and choice. What unites these thinkers is their intuition that the environment structures knowledge acquisition while, at the same time, being shaped by it. They spatialized cognition, paving the way for theories of “ecological perception” and 4E-cognition alike, in which the environment and perceptual functions are involved in a reciprocal process [16,34,35].

The body maintains a structural stability over time, even if processes of aging or growing change its shape. Organic beings possess a relatively stable form that posits as it were two directions. One is inward, experiencing itself as a functioning system. One might notice, for instance, that one is hungry or tired; this feeling is bodily experienced. In the other direction, the experience is outward: one might notice something to eat in the environment, spot a place to sleep, or watch for predators. One experiences oneself as being embedded in a larger environment. Organic life engages continuously in a metabolism and the (seasonal) rhythms of its environment: we eat, digest, warm ourselves, and secrete waste [15] (pp. 182–183).

Plessner applies this insight to the positionality of organic life: animals live in the here and now, but also have some mastery over their bodies. They can anticipate events, experience stress, fear, and joy. In a basic sense, the animal can refer to itself. Its form—although interactive through exchanges with the environment and possessing a certain freedom of action—is open to the world. It lives from its center and

as a center [15] (pp. 269–270). Human beings possess these characteristics, but add a particular positional feature. Human beings are bodies (as in physical, biological entities), are in these bodies (as psychic states), and are outside their bodies (as observers to this psychophysical relation). As indicated, PA questions the entire subject-object relationship, displacing it in a further field. For Plessner, the human being is alive, living, *and* living. Personhood consists in experiencing the rift of *excentric positionality*. Humans live their lives from the inside *and* the outside. It is a part of their constitution to be positioned on both inside *and* outside. This tension always remains—the third viewpoint does not result in a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* or reconciliation [15] (p. 271). Like Scheler and Gehlen, Plessner’s account hinges on an inherent experiential and lived tension that characterizes the “human place in the cosmos”. In Fischer’s words:

The rupture in the living entity is not to be understood as a breakthrough of the mind, which could essentially operate for itself. Excentric positionality is intended to describe the situation of a living entity that has an in-built detached viewpoint, an excentric point that cannot exist without the energy of the centrally positioned body, from whose realm of responsibility it remains removed [13] (p. 161).

We are thus always (minimally) in two places at once, without ever settling for one of them in favor of the other—indeed, our constitution is such that we almost simultaneously inhabit and embody these viewpoints.

In all three classical positions, displacement (excentric positionality) forms the background to conceptualize the human capacity to act. For Scheler, this capacity is torn between instinctive drives without clear direction on one hand, and the imagery that the Spirit furnishes on the other. To act is never a simple given: human decisions are always a compound of factors that belong to different realms of the organismic life, whether natural or cultural. Some influences might be (partially) biologically determined or may emerge through inclination and habituation. The type of desires formed by an individual depends on its environment (the “nature”) and its capacity either to overcome certain inherited images or to shape new imagery (the “nurture”). So, for Scheler, the inner environment of drives is controlled by a dual capacity that is both internal and external. It is dependent on environmental input, as well as on the capacity for introspection and on the cultivation or selection of certain images over others. As Theodore Roszak pointed out, there is a direct link here to Freud’s concepts of the drives and their link to fantasies: both have their roots in the physical constitution of the human being [22].

3. Responsivity as an Anthropological Concept

In their focus on the excentric positionality of human beings, the classical approaches highlight the central importance of our capacity for *responsiveness* towards our natural, cultural and social environment.

In considering the nature of responses, Bernhard Waldenfels’ work on *responsivity* is directly relevant. Waldenfels formulated a phenomenology of responsivity: we respond to our bodies and our environment, yet they also appear as alien to us. In a way, we encounter the as strange (*Fremd*) [36]. Waldenfels shares a commonality with PA: the displacement or alienation is positioned in the way the world appears to us, including our own bodies. Waldenfels’ idea moves beyond mere intentionality: fundamentally, we respond to a call (*Anspruch*) of something “radical Other”. Applied to our lifeworld as a totality, there appears an elective affinity with the concepts of PA here, especially in the context of the Age of Extinction. Our environment changes, and so a new register of experiences opens, from solastalgia to eco-anxiety and even climate depression.

For Scheler, responsiveness manifests itself in the dynamic relationship between drives and the cultural imagery directing it. We respond to different—often opposing—forces. For Gehlen, effectively responding to natural circumstances is the human capacity *par excellence*. The result of this responsiveness on a collective scale is the formation of cultures. They are repositories of acts, decisions, habits, customs, conventions, and behavioral patterns that sustain human life and compensate, in the cultural domain, for

what the natural domain withheld: given our world-openness, responsiveness is a necessity. For Plessner, organisms are excentrically positioned—their physical form does not coincide with their mode of life. In their capacity for responsivity, human beings conceptualize themselves as experiencing and responsive agents in the world they actively shape—and which shapes them in turn. They are neither completely submerged in this world nor are they elevated above it. To hold the first position would be to revert to naïve animism; to ascribe to the second position would relapse into scientific positivism. Human beings are caught between two positions, neither of which they occupy fully. Yet, these positions still overlap and inform each other, even while they never fully coincide.

This tension is explicitly worked out in Plessner's theory, in which he sketches out a series of increasingly complex levels that connect the inorganic to the organic world. As per point (I), responding to, for instance, environmental cues demands a body endowed with certain properties, inclinations, and capacities. The merit of Plessner's (and to some degree Gehlen's) theory resides in showing how these bodies and what they afford are anchored in more basic foundational, biological, chemical, cognitive and reflexive processes. In analyzing the human capacity to respond and grounding it into findings from biology and chemistry allows us to widen the field of PA to include recent findings in environmental psychology, ecology and anthropology. Rasini has described such accounts quite rightfully as “images of the human” (*Menschbilder*) [18]. Like any image, such depictions hide as much as they reveal.

The innovation of PA—to view the human being as an embodied, embedded, and enactive totality, especially in its capacity for self-shaping (*Selbstgestaltung*)—was to circumvent the question “what *is* the human being?”. They understood that once we inquire “what *is* X?”, we are obliged to provide answers that circumscribe and delineate X. PA does not ask questions about the essence of a being, but questions of the responses it enacts, embodies, and establishes between its mental life, its body, and the physical environment in which it is embedded.

If one wishes to *resonate* with a phenomenon rather than merely observe it, a different type of question is required. It must no longer be focused on defining an essence. By fully embracing the idea of anthropology as an experiential science (*Erfahrungswissenschaft*), the experiences and responses of human beings become the focus of analysis. By analyzing responses, one can infer behavioral patterns, affective, cognitive, individual, and cultural habits, and their evolution. In performing such analyses, anthropology resonates with its subject matter, sharing and engaging its experiences. So, description is not aimed at furnishing yet another “image of the human” but of chronicling various ways of responding to the call of the world. Especially in the Age of Extinction, this task becomes increasingly important. The global population has become a planetary force, the cultural comprehension of which demands a finetuned responsivity.

4. Philosophical Anthropology for Shifting Times

A new, reinvigorated form of PA would internalize this insight, carefully recording how human beings respond to changes in their environment. By way of providing examples and working out several thematic research fields, I revisit points I–IV from Section 1.2, showing how a new PA provides practical concepts and methods for dealing with our current ecological predicament. Each subsection is devoted to a single point. In particular, the goal of this section is to expand on the conceptual underpinnings of PA to address the issues of climate change, extinction, and ecological destruction. As such, it provides a wide range of conceptual angles and possible points of encounter to re-envision the “human place in the cosmos”, as PA had originally done.

4.1. Centralizing Relations (Point I)

Classical PA inquired about the “human place in the cosmos”. This question already assumes human beings as being positioned, (1) in the sense of interacting with physical environments, (2) as an embodied

being, and (3) being able to understand oneself as having a position. Put differently, as mediates between oneself and one's environment, but also being positioned at the interface between them [15] (p. 302). With existentialism, this realization had been problematized. With the advent of ecocriticism, this predicament as the author of the climate crisis and experiencing subject of "a damaged planet", this question returns once more forcefully.

Responsivity blurs the boundaries between individual and environment, highlighting the relations that obtain between them. Such blurring implies the foregrounding of convergencies, symbiogenesis, collaborative entanglement, and co-evolution. This rich relationality extends in multiple directions. *First*, it creates a new, level field connecting human and non-human agency. Recently, anthropology and philosophy alike have embraced the non-human world, consisting of materials, processes, and phenomena. The non-human is increasingly viewed as a crucial component of a new non-anthropocentric anthropology. It is an essential ingredient of what it means to be human.

A robust paradigm of thinking has sought recently to overthrow the privileged idea of humanity dominating the biosphere. The emergence of Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, weird realism, Jane Bennett's accounts of vibrant matter and onto-sympathy, and Anne Tsing's studies on the material dimension of exploitative processes all highlight human dependency on non-human agency:

[T]he non-human project has questioned the category of the 'human' and 'this has involved considering how the human functions in relation to social justice agendas and in the context of debates about the role of the human in environmental futures' [37] (p. 356).

The human/non-human coupling "horizontalizes" the relationship between humanity and the rest of the world. This is because humans and non-humans share materiality [38–40]. They are subject to many of the same laws. This entails that non-human actors are accorded an agency that PA must analyze if it wishes to assert something about the human place in the cosmos. The non-human turn imposes the imperative to engage with various agents in the world that we former did not think of as agents, ranging from chemicals, mRNA sequences, and fungi to plastic soup and microplastics. This viewpoint recognizes that humans are always already radically entangled, and that competition and control are just two ways of looking at the natural and cultural worlds. It can be critically questioned whether these ossified ways of looking will serve us for the challenges of the 21st century:

Approaches tuned to "multispecies becoming-with" better sustain us in staying with the trouble on Terra. An emerging extended synthesis in transdisciplinary biologies and arts proposes to string figures tying together human and non-human ecologies, evolution, development, history, affects, performances, technologies, and more [11] (p. 28).

Haraway suggests considering an essentially richer field of investigation in which the newest insights from biology inform a richer, interconnected, and humbler picture of the human place in the cosmos. Just as the classical thinkers of PA utilized the latest findings in biology and zoology to formulate elaborate, anti-reductionist theories of humanity and the human condition, so too could a revived PA fully embrace the "extended synthesis" emerging now from biology, ecology, and systems thinking alike.

Second, the focus on relations decenters the human being once more. But this decentering need not lead to alarmism or nihilism. It shows that the "web of meaning" in which humanity is implicated and entangled offers multiple ways for beneficial entanglements and multi-species collaboration. As Svenning has pointed out, there is a very real chance for a "wilder Anthropocene" that we need to imagine first [41] (p. 67–70) [42]. In other words, we need to conceptualize our position in a new world. What does not help is the so-called "shifting baseline syndrome", by which we can only imagine environments that we remember. The powerful imaginative and experiential tools of PA—particularly its emphasis on displacement—provide such instruments for envisioning. So, PA could become a truly creative

anthropology, engaging in conceptualizing future scenarios in which human and non-human agency are related in fundamentally different ways than they are now. Here, immersive fieldwork and the practices of reading as well as writing play productive roles. The anthropological imagination is not a mere recorder of encounters—it is a personal account of such encounters. Pursued systematically, as an instrument to communicate a universal predicament. Likewise, this immersion capitalizes on self-shaping capacities—through fieldwork, anthropologists transform the collective experiential field, and their narratives—like Scheler’s Spirit—shape the thoughts of others.

4.2. Anthropology and Chronicling Sensibilities (Point II)

For an organism to respond means that it integrates the cues it receives within the full bandwidth of its form of life. Responding thus surpasses acting on a stimulus or merely following a drive or instinct. To respond to environmental cues, emotions, bodily signals, behaviors, written information, myths, tacit beliefs, or intuitions implies a fully embodied, embedded and enactive comportment [43]. For instance, psychologically, changes in the environment cause serious and widespread impacts. This ranges from emotions like grief to specific forms of ecology-related or climate-related anxiety to new emotional state like solastalgia. Originating in the work on trauma processing by Joanna Macy and continued by—amongst others—Glenn Albrecht, a new vocabulary for thinking about emotions, affective states relating to our ecological predicament comes into being [10,44]. These words support sensemaking and allow for construing a new conceptual and ethical world that responds to the changing and metamorphosing present. Such words are not only responses, but they point towards a new pattern of responsiveness—a gradually emerging, new attitude towards the world.

Across different cultures and depending on the ecological emergency, the responses of individuals, groups or populations differ across a wide affective and cognitive spectrum. Feelings and experiences associated with a changing Earth range from anxiety to uncertainty and mental health issues, as well as the complete reversal of traditional lifestyles, the loss of specific crafts or ways of living [45–48]. Responsivity should not only be approached from an analytical point of view, merely mapping out responses to events. Instead, a new and invigorated PA could well assist in providing new and effective habits of dealing with climate change and ecological destruction.

Habits express a meaningful encounter between an agent and their world and involve a kind of “refined responsiveness” to environmental conditions [49] (p. 138). When someone develops a habit, they “acquire a way of navigating a sector of the world” [50] (p. 107). Once more, philosophical anthropology cultivates new habits through fieldwork and immersion, but above all by integrating the experiential domain with an integrative, enveloping theoretical attitude. When engaging in a concrete activity such as gardening, rewilding, hiking, or agriculture, intelligent habits involve a fine-tuned sensibility to the specific conditions that render such practices worthwhile. One can look at plants, landscapes, ecosystems or crops and understand whether they are healthy due to too much (or too little) climatic exposure, erosion, nutrition or soil conditions. These habits support active thinking by restricting the focus of attention and fixing boundaries, and by enlarging one’s range of possible actions, observations, imaginings, and opportunities [49] (p. 143). For instance, when engaged in mushroom picking, intelligent habits allow one to distinguish between those that are edible and those that aren’t, and to bracket out features associated with the blueberries that are present by resisting whatever pull they might have on one’s attention. There is a “thinning out of the perceptual space” [50] (p. 110).

Likewise, if someone observes a landscape, they can represent certain specific things in it. They might focus on the interplay between mass and space, the water system formed by lakes and rivers, identifiable ecological gradients, *etc.* For each of these perspectives, (aesthetic) attunement, (artistic) sensibility, and “refined responsiveness” are required [49] (p. 138). What develops is a fine-grained, layered systemic responsiveness that understands the system as a whole or its parts (for instance, when picking mushrooms

and correctly identifying the growth conditions of their localities). One learns to “broaden” the thinking to a degree that one merges with the subject matter. As will be discussed later, the eco-imagination and anthropological imagination have decisive roles to play.

For a new and reinvigorated PA, mapping these cultural currents redraws the conceptual map of what it means to be human, viewed through the lens of affects and sensibilities. It helps in reconceptualizing the role of bodily involvement in dealing with changing environments. In particular, changes in seasonal habits and bodily responses offer a rich field for investigation. What tells the changed bodily comportment us about our relation to the environment and how does our self-image change when the environment changes? As Kohn and Tsing have pointed out in various studies, the environment itself is a lively and dynamic social system, not a mute background to exclusively human activity. It follows that changes in the environment change the social structures interwoven with it [51–55]. Their studies cast the environment as a partner or a system with social, existential, and ethical as well as material properties with which we continuously tangle and become. In this sense, PA allows the chance to include, invite, and integrate so-called “indigenous knowledge” as an integral part of its methodology, thereby moving beyond the Western mindset and the institutional boundaries of academia. This exchange has scarcely begun, but it is a promising perspective to examine how human sensibility resonates with climate change across the globe.

4.3. Focus on Lived Experience on All Levels (Point III)

To respond entails also producing new conditions for responding. Cultures produce and stabilize such new conditions. They stabilize and nurture certain behavioral, affective, and emotional patterns and habits. Through the construction of narratives, repeated actions, annual rhythms, values, and norms, such patterns are passed on and developed, while others become obsolete and disappear. Confronted with the *Gegenfeld* or the “field of surprises”, cultural structures mediate the raw impact of situations and problems that are encountered, prescribing structured responses or carefully calibrated attitudes.

For Scheler, this phenomenon manifested itself in the production of shared images—collective dreams, ambitions, convictions, or values—that influence how people choose and decide among multiple courses of action. It manifests itself in the maintenance of certain norms and practices that are held in high esteem. Examples might be discipline, fortitude, craftsmanship, a reverence for nature, or impulse control. The classical thinkers of PA focused their efforts on how individuals and the collective (cultural) structures in which they were embedded could be conceptualized from a comprehensive anthropological viewpoint.

The new synthesis in biology provides powerful themes for an anthropology tailored to the challenges of the Age of Extinction. Notably, the idea of the individual as the ontological unit of analysis has been subverted. Living individuals are *holobionts*—giant communities of cooperating organisms. For instance, cows cannot digest grass—the microbes in their guts can [56]. The organism “cow” is a conglomerate of different communities that cooperate. The approximately 160 different types of bacteria populate the human digestive tract. Without this community of microbes and fungi, the complex gut-brain axis cannot function at all, thereby curtailing cognitive capacities. Complex organisms are communities rather than individuals [57–61].

This biological-ecological (and indeed communitarian) perspective entangles and embeds the non-human in the sphere of the human. Entangled in a broader planetary metabolism, the individual, as an isolated Kantian transcendental subject, becomes a myth. Plessner’s notions of assimilation and dissimilation point towards the multiple interactions between organism and environment, which serves to maintain the stable structure of the organism. Once we turn to environmental psychology and modern literature of eco-anxiety, we see how deeply outer and inner environments are linked, even to the point that the distinction seems to break down.

Looking outwards *and* inwards simultaneously, lived experience is not constrained to the lived body or the life of the mind. A robust discipline of ecopsychology has theorized the multiple links between perception, mood, and psychological life. If “Spirit” or the collective imagination in Scheler’s sense

furnishes images of the world, what would it create nowadays, confronted with scenes of a damaged planet? In ecocriticism, the ecological imagination has created powerful images to deal with the Age of Extinction. The discipline of anthropology can accomplish a similar mind-broadening effect:

[A]nthropology has a crucial method to contribute: its fundamental mode of imagination, its approach to humanity as an open horizon of displacement rather than a fixed position in the world [54] (p. 80).

As the boundary between outer and inner worlds breaks down, and the continuities and relations between human and non-human are properly viewed, a new imaginative horizon opens—one in which anthropology becomes more systemic, more entangled and less focused on fixity and definition. This requires an imaginative leap that philosophy or the sciences cannot accomplish on their own. Classical PA furnished the conceptual instruments to perform this leap, especially when combined with a rich literature in ecopsychology, ecocriticism, systems theory and environmental philosophy.

4.4. Resituating the Subject-Object-Relation (Point IV)

The reasoning of all classical thinkers in PA starts at the level of the life processes, processing to the organism, and extending outwards to the environment. This approach avails us of an option to recast the whole subject-object relation once more. This time not in the same way as the classical Philosophical Anthropologists had done (by making an “external viewpoint” an integral feature of an organism), but as a radicalized repositioning of the (human) organism in its environment.

This predicament entrenches human beings in a deeper and more dynamic environment, characterized by the ceaseless flow of information and the confrontation with climatic and ecological effects that supersede the scale of the individual. Even such global effects are experienced at an individual level. Every single person who contributes to environmental pollution is both perpetrator and victim.

Considering the importance of experience, we see that the safe, distanced, and comfortably abstract “view from nowhere” is replaced by an involuntary immersion. Through our bodies, immune systems, and perceptual systems, we experience changes in the biosphere. Glenn Albrecht’s penetrating work, as well as the case studies of the effects of climate change and ecological degradation, show how fine-grained and almost subterranean these experiences are. The idea that human beings have an “external viewpoint” built into their biological constitution also allows us to conceptualize our ecological predicament through a variety of sensible channels. It is this centrality of sense experience (in the broadest sense of the term) that furnishes a rich research field for PA. Immersive experiences, bodily sensed changes, new affects and emotions, as well as psychological states can all accommodate a new PA that takes its own idea of the resituated subject-object relationship fully seriously. For the new Philosophical Anthropologist, experiences are concrete events to reconceptualize the human condition in terms of responsibility. The comfortable confines of armchair philosophy cannot compete with the richness of fieldwork:

One cannot become an anthropologist without a sense of the critical and transformative force of such implicatedness in the lives of others, because coming of age in the field depends on an exposure to these powers, in the texture of one’s own being and beyond [62] (p. 112).

So framed, the term “fieldwork” acquires a new and deepened meaning. It connotes not just working in this or that environment or habitat, but it fully includes a broadening and deepening of the “field of experience”, or the range of different experiences one is exposed to. By deliberately immersing oneself in the experiences that the Age of Extinction has to offer, a rich new register of responsive sensibility can be cultivated to resonate with the present. One must engage in “[f]orms of experience that put the field of the human into play” [62] (p. 79). Put like this, life processes itself become narratives; cultures become registers of accumulate experiences. In adopting such a field-like approach, PA can remain systematic, yet fully immersed [63].

Repositioning the subject-object relationship foregrounds the distributed yet ubiquitous presence of non-human actors, broadening our range of experience, but also what counts as a meaningful encounter or relationship. Engaging with the environment from this deepened viewpoint may be the newest step in our self-shaping through anthropology.

5. Conclusion: Fieldwork, or Cultivating a Mode of Experience

The many ways in which we bodily, emotively, and affectively respond become a new field of inquiry for a fully developed “experiential science”. The raw material of experience—accessible through the embodied, embedded, and enactive forms by which human beings resonate with their inner and outer environments—becomes a new domain for sensemaking.

This perspective is not the reduction of anthropology to a kind of descriptive approach, but the emergence of an interdisciplinary, fully embodied, cross-sectional theory that fully includes and integrates perspectives of neurology, psychology, biology, ecology, sociology, as well as the many hybrid fields that may develop between them. The legacy of the classical thinkers of PA is exactly this openness and willingness to think synoptically, following empirical evidence without being imprisoned by it.

Filtered through immersive (often personal) experiences aided by the expressive apparatus of the anthropological imagination, we glimpse the outline of a newly expanding, experiential space the coordinates of which shift with changes in the world. If human beings are reciprocally determined by the world, any response must cause a counterresponse. As this inherently communicative and resonant process unfolds, accelerating and branching out in new directions, so, too, must an *Erfahrungswissenschaft* resonate with it and develop along. A new science of experience requires a newly conceived and carefully cultivated world-openness towards human and non-human experiences of all kinds, particularly those involving a new range of actors, some as large as a forest and others as small as a mushroom. In anthropologically broadening our experience, new forms of sensemaking suggest themselves from the periphery of cognition, where they remained dormant until a finely tuned ecological attitude reinvigorated them. The new experiential science of Philosophical Anthropology may well aid us in navigating and surviving the unknowns of the Age of Extinction.

So, what kind of “fieldwork” would a philosopher-anthropologist perform to comprehend the human condition in the Age of Extinction? First, it would be a kind of fieldwork that maps the degree to which human responses to the climate change and ecological destruction are rooted in our biological make-up, but also how our excentric positionality allows us to cope effectively with it. The “external viewpoint” inherent in the human being allows for reflection and, thus, for conceptualizing one’s predicament. Second, it would constitute the bridge between the subtle shades of experience and modes of (textual) expression. In the imaginative description of Philippe Descola:

[A]nthropology, (in the wider sense of the term) is not an endeavour that could be characterised by a clearly circumscribed domain of inquiry (...). It should be seen, rather, as a certain style of knowledge—that is, as a pattern of discovery and a mode of systematisation that are supported by a set of skills progressively acquired through practice, both a turn of mind and a tour de main, a particular knack picked up through experience and acknowledged among others who have gained the same proficiency in dealing with social facts in our own special way [64] (p. 72).

In that sense, science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin has even suggested anthropological approaches as a form of “speculative science” [65] (p. 102). Or, alternatively, an account of a world as it *could* be, or a novel human condition that could develop on a damaged planet. Put differently, it creates a form of critique that “nurtures the openings and possibilities already present in the world and its experience” [62] (p. 117). This could be critiqued as creative emergence [62] (p. 119). What emerges is a newfound, open, and indeed ecosystemic theory of the human condition. This approach turns the potential risk of an “open

theory” or absence of any final theory of the human being into an advantage. In the absence of a final theory, one can—and possibly even should—freely adjust the conception of the human condition and its place in the cosmos. Third, most importantly, fieldwork for a new Philosophical Anthropology could be to regard the world once more as a *Gegenfeld* or field of encounters. In the Age of Extinction, such encounters are often novel, as climate change and ecological destruction produce unfamiliar effects. However, these encounters can be systematically utilized to redefine and shape our self-image, improving individual and collective decision-making for the decades to come.

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