

HERMENEUTICS AT THE TIME OF THE ANTHROPOCENE: THE CASE OF HANS-GEORG GADAMER

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ABSTRACT

The article puts forward the thesis that Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics can be useful for conceptualizing the issue of the Anthropocene. Both speculative features of hermeneutics generally and specific Gadamerian insights are helpful for this matter. As for the speculative features of hermeneutics, the concept of understanding may be used, as well as Gadamer's analysis of prejudices and of the history of effect. Further, Gadamer's ecological insights anticipated some problems raised by the philosophy of the Anthropocene and are therefore also helpful in our current articulation of the concept.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene, hermeneutics, environmental humanities, Hans-Georg Gadamer

HERMENEUTICS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

The main thesis I would like to consider in this paper is as follows: Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can be useful for conceptualizing the issues of the Anthropocene and should be treated as a discourse that helps us to develop an appropriate response to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. This is due to both the logic of hermeneutical thought and Gadamer's specific ecological insights that anticipated certain problems raised by the philosophy of the Anthropocene. Because of the latter, the author of *Truth and Method* can also be called a proto-diagnostician of the epoch who grasped some of its main features, as it were, *in statu nascendi*, and this is a subsidiary claim I would like to defend in the paper.

Calling Hans-Georg Gadamer a witness in the case of the Anthropocene may seem unintuitive and even counterproductive. At first glance, Gadamer's philosophy appears

antipodal to that of the Anthropocene discourse, which focuses as much on the diagnoses of humans becoming a planetary geological force, radically affecting all the conditions of life on Earth and being the initiator of the global climate crisis, as on working out discursive, material or political practices to counteract the negative effects of human domination over the world.¹ These practices seem to turn against those very values that the author of *Truth and Method* insisted on: anthropocentrism, ontological and biopolitical boundaries separating human being from other beings which makes it the only driving force on this planet, and finally, the authority of the humanistic tradition and the privileging of the linguistic character of reality.²

However, a closer examination reveals that things are a little more complicated, since while I do agree that the diagnosis of the Anthropocene is correct (apart from some terminological and chronological controversies³), and the risks associated with it are very (not to say: deadly) serious, the positioning of hermeneutics in the role of an ‘opponent’ of the broadly understood environmental humanities is based on a very general and – in my opinion – unjustified image of hermeneutics. More nuanced insight into the logic of hermeneutical thought would allow us to see it as a discourse that helps us to conceptualize the Anthropocene issues, in fact, that helps us to develop a more hermeneutically sufficient approach to them. It encourages us to look at the Anthropocene not as a settled scientific matter, but rather as a historical process. And while this process is, of course, backed up by science, the main thing is that it opens the horizon of specific questions which are posed to us as a deeply hermeneutical task of understanding. So, let us begin with some general remarks.

¹ See basic literature on the Anthropocene: Crutzen, Stoermer, 2000; Hamilton, Bonneuil, Gemenne, 2015; Bonneuil, Fressoz, 2016; Angus, 2016; Moore, 2016; Hamilton, 2017; Bińczyk, 2018.

² Generally, one can say that Gadamerian anthropocentrism is a legacy of Martin Heidegger, because the author of *Truth and Method* maintains Heideggerian distinction between man and other animals and the main rationale for that is having a language which defines man as *zoon logon echon*: ‘Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. The world as world exists for man as for no other creature that is in the world. But this world is verbal in nature. (...) This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of world is thus opposed to the concept of environment, which all living beings in the world possess’ (Gadamer, 2004: 440-441). However, I show later in the article that Gadamer managed to overcome this perspective, at least partially.

³ There are two basic weaknesses of the term ‘Anthropocene’: first, it has not been officially approved yet as a suggested name for the new geological epoch due to the lack of a reliable stratigraphic marker (see for example: Zalasiewicz et al., 2015); second, as the term defining the contemporary state of the world, it is quite misleading in that it suggests that the responsibility for ecological and climate crisis is borne by humanity ‘as such’, while in fact it was brought forth by particular socio-political actors. It seems that among many alternative names for the Anthropocene, James W. Moore’s ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore, 2016) or Alf Hornborg’s ‘Technocene’ (Hornborg, 2015) would be closest to Gadamer’s views. Along with the question of when the Anthropocene began, these issues are themselves very hermeneutical. I address some of them in the paper, but this is not my main concern. I believe they need a separate study.

According to Gadamerian hermeneutics, understanding is the basic practice through which human being refers to the world, finds itself in the world and achieves its own identity. It does not consist of the methodical formulation of positive judgments about the world, but situates itself as if at the 'source' of existence, so it is not equal to 'understandability' and harmonious relation with other beings or living creatures, but indicates 'being thrown' into the world in which a human being must always find one's bearings. What is important in the context of the Anthropocene is that the understanding determines the all-encompassing nature of hermeneutics. Since it concerns the whole human experience, it should permanently widen the horizons in which it is located. Since it falls within the facticity of existence, it cannot ignore the fact that existence is always co-existence, dependent not only on culture and other people, but also on non-human beings, the biosphere or all the conditions of life on Earth. Since understanding is historical, it must creatively answer one of the main challenges of our historical situation, which is the climate crisis.

This very general insight already shows that the logic of hermeneutics remains open to the problems related to the Anthropocene epoch. However, those diagnosticians of the Anthropocene who have noticed this 'hermeneutical' aspect of ecological issues have most often referred to the legacy of Martin Heidegger (Irwin, 2008), neglecting (in my opinion, wrongly) Gadamer's thought. I believe that unlike Heidegger, who focuses on the 'essence' of technology and aims at 'the recall of Being' thus ignoring empirical problems, Gadamer instead provides us with theoretical tools that are subject to ecocritical concretizations. So far, this has been indicated virtually only by the representatives of environmental hermeneutics (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, Utsler, 2014), and by David R. Keller (1998), who proposed an 'ecological hermeneutics', drawing on the implications of Gadamer's critique of modern science. However, I would argue such thinkers have used rather the 'speculative' features of hermeneutics, applying them to ecological issues. Although this 'speculative move' is important for me as well, I would like to show that Gadamer also had something to say about the Anthropocene as such (even though, of course, he did not use the term).

Gadamer as a Proto-Diagnostician of the Anthropocene

In a sense, some of the problems concerning the current Anthropocene discourse had already been noted by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. As described by its Polish translator, Bogdan Baran, *Truth and Method* is the fruit of the 1950s – one of its most important adversaries is the post-war fascination with technology resulting from new positivistic ideology and leading to a rapid technological progress (Baran, 2013). That is why Baran calls Gadamer’s book an anticipation or a parallel of deliberations developed only in the second half of the twentieth century. I think that the translator’s thesis can be drawn further: one can say that to some extent *Truth and Method* anticipates the contemporary Anthropocene discourse as well, since in the background of the book one can hear a ‘live’ diagnosis of the ‘Great Acceleration’, which is a period after the Second World War, when, as a result of the economic recovery and the Cold War, there was a rapid and dynamic increase in the exploitation of natural resources and an unprecedented intensification of human impact on the environment. According to many researchers, it is the Great Acceleration that is the most reliable start date of the Anthropocene epoch (or its mature form). There is agreement on this among such scholars as Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill (Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill, 2007), Timothy Morton (2013), geologist Jan Zalasiewicz (Zalasiewicz et al., 2015), Clive Hamilton (2017) and Ewa Bińczyk⁴ (2018). Therefore, in a sense, the task of a reliable justification of the humanities Gadamer sets for himself in *Truth and Method* is inseparably connected with an opposition to the logic of the modern natural sciences which projects in advance ‘a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them’, resulting in ‘objectivizing it [the world] and making it available for whatever purposes it [science] likes’ (Gadamer 2004: 449-450). This, as we know, has led to the Great Acceleration and, despite the numerous voices ‘crying out in the desert’⁵, still controls our socio-political order (more and more resembling disorder), even if the natural sciences themselves have reflected on this point.

⁴ In the words of the latter: ‘the changes characterizing the Great Acceleration definitely go beyond the anomalies we encountered in the Holocene. In the time of the Great Acceleration after 1950, we observe changes in the nitrogen cycle and in the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil (unseen for 2.5 billion years), changes related to the increase in the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere (they have not been present on Earth for 800,000 years), as well as a dramatic increase of ocean acidification (level not present on Earth for 300 million years). All this is a sign of the previously unknown (...) environmental pressure of one species. This is accompanied by the loss of biodiversity recorded in all terrestrial ecosystems, as well as the planetary homogenization of species (...)’ (Bińczyk, 2018: 91-92).

⁵ In the context of the Anthropocene, this term acquires a new, ominous and non-metaphorical meaning: ‘crying out in the desert’ is now also a crying out in the world that has been desertified and is really dying. That brings to mind one of the alternatives to the term ‘Anthropocene’: the Eremozoic (Wilson, 2006).

From this perspective one can even say that scientific reflection on the Anthropocene (and this includes i.a. the diagnosis of the Great Acceleration or the IPCC reports) has a fundamentally hermeneutical nature, since it comes to grips with Gadamerian insights and gives up on the arrogance of modern sciences. But it is not enough to say so. Given that every science is a kind of understanding, the Anthropocene discourse should be ‘concerned with the “scientific” integrity of acknowledging the commitment involved in all understanding’ (Gadamer 2004: xxv). For this reason, even though Gadamer could agree with the diagnosis of the Great Acceleration as the start date of the Anthropocene, one should bear in mind that this is not a mere scientific fact, but rather a historical process which self-presents itself in its results and interpretations. Thus, today’s context allows us to treat *Truth and Method* as a theoretical basis for the development of the problem of ‘understanding at the time of the Anthropocene’.⁶ This – apart from hitherto inquiry – is also possible thanks to Gadamer’s analysis of prejudices and of the history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).

As we know, for Gadamer prejudices are a positive condition of possibility of any existential involvement. Every understanding comes from some premises, situates itself in a particular tradition, addresses the issues of particular socio-cultural order, even if remaining aware of it only partially or not at all. That is why, for example, the overcoming of prejudices, pushed forward by the Enlightenment, is itself a prejudice of universal, unconditioned reason, whereas in fact prejudices are ‘condition of understanding’ (Gadamer 2004: 278), and the ‘true historical being’ remains aware that ‘even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows’ (Gadamer 2004: 282-283). All this does not mean that we are enslaved by our own prejudices. On the contrary, the task of understanding constitutes each time separating the appropriate prejudices from the wrong ones, that is: those ‘by which we misunderstand’ (Gadamer, 2004: 298). In order to make such a separation, however, we have to take account of our own historicity (Gadamer, 2004: 299), our own hermeneutic situation and the tasks and problems it poses for us. The question of prejudices is therefore inseparable from

⁶ I am referring at this point to Bruno Latour’s essay *Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene*. Among many other insights he notes something that is important for Gadamer as well: ‘The great paradox of the »scientific world view« is to have succeeded in *withdrawing historicity* from the world’ (2014: 14).

historicity: it is the fact that something strikes us, that encourages us to verify our prejudices.

So, if '*understanding is, essentially, a historically affected event*' (Gadamer, 2004: 299), and '*consciousness of being affected by history (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation*' (2004: 301), then one can say in the context of the Anthropocene that whether we treat the natural environment subjectively, as a partner, or instrumentally, as a source of so-called natural resources, turns out to be the result of our proper hermeneutic consciousness (which means, properly responding to its own historicity suffering from the extensive ecological crisis) or wrong hermeneutic consciousness (which means, ignoring this historicity). The notion of the history of effect also reveals that the awareness of the historical process that takes place in front of our eyes confronts us with the task of cultivating an adequate '*hermeneutics of the Anthropocene*', and that is why I fully agree with Kate Rigby when she states that the '*catastrophic horizon of the present [requires] hermeneutic self-consciousness*' (Rigby, 2008: 37).

That is also why I would like to consider here the thesis that the Anthropocene is the hermeneutic horizon of our time, painfully ingraining itself within our practices of understanding, even if we are not always aware of it ('[philosophical hermeneutics concerns] not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing' [Gadamer, 2004: xxi]) and putting us in front of radical hermeneutical, ecological, ethical and political challenges (however, none of these orders can be separated from each other) literally threatening the living conditions on Earth and calling for a fundamental and immediate reevaluation of our relationships with non-human others.

According to Gadamer the concept of horizon is essential to the concept of situation, because it works out the situation and enables us to get the right approach to it. 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (Gadamer 2004: 301). That means it plays a role of a transcendental condition of understanding which constitutes our life-world: we can only understand something that has appeared in a certain horizon. What is important, however, the horizon does not constitute an objective, non-historical fact. On the contrary, it is linked with the situation in such a way that it remains open, historical and

subject to interpretation: 'The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is rather something into which we move and that moves with us.' (Gadamer, 2004: 303).

To treat the Anthropocene as the hermeneutic horizon is, therefore, to acknowledge at least four things: 1. that it was only this horizon opened by new scientific data and disciplines such as Earth systems science that enabled the emergence of the Anthropocene problems in a phenomenological sense; 2. that the Anthropocene is a transcendental condition of our being-in-the world, which fundamentally changes 'the rules of the game', because it is the risk of climate breakdown, ecological catastrophe and species extinction that frames our being-in-the-world and our understanding; 3. that the Anthropocene is not, however, an 'discovered' objective fact, but a historical process which 'encounters us and does so as if it addressed us and is concerned with us' (Gadamer 2004: 457); 4. that it is a global process which concerns us all and calls us to an appropriate response.

Now, if we agree that the Anthropocene is the hermeneutic horizon of our time, our historical challenge, then we must note that what it has been doing to us is letting us know about a total falsity of anthropocentric prejudices hitherto in force that have raised the impassable ontological boundary between a human being and other beings and justified the human exploitation of nature. The task posed by the hermeneutic horizon grasped in such a way would be a radical reevaluation of the ideas about the place of a human in the world, aimed at establishing something that I would call an extended hermeneutical community, encompassing non-human actors, both animate and inanimate.

However, what is also important is that Gadamer's 'usefulness' for the Anthropocene discourse is not limited to providing us with certain speculations that undergo ecological concretization. He is also the author of texts that prove that he had already noticed the seeds of the historical process now called the Anthropocene before the term even existed: the two essays *Theory, Technology, Praxis* from 1972 and *The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future* from 1985. Referring to these texts, I want to defend the thesis that Gadamer can be called a proto-diagnostician of the Anthropocene. I understand this thesis in a 'weak' sense that although he did not know the term itself

and did not have an access to appropriate scientific data, he managed to recognize the historical process and – thanks to specific hermeneutic approach – respond to it. In other words, if we agree that the Great Acceleration is the start date of the Anthropocene, then we could say that Gadamer developed his philosophy while the Anthropocene already existed and he noticed some (of course not all!) of its most relevant features. This does not mean that Gadamerian responses to this hermeneutical situation were entirely adequate, however, we can use his insights as a starting point to formulate more radical postulates and to recognize the hermeneutical status of the Anthropocene discourse as such which, basically, is the practice of understanding of what has been happening (to us).⁷

In *Theory, Technology, Praxis*, Gadamer formulates very sober observations about the size of the scientific and technical mastering of nature in the era of the Great Acceleration. The author of *Truth and Method* notes that it is fundamentally different from the practices of subjugating nature⁸ that occurred in previous centuries: if previously they were always local and had a negative impact on particular ecosystems or their elements (for example, ‘the deforestation of woods, which turned into barren lands as a consequence, the extinction of animal species through hunting, the exhaustion of soils through cultivation, the drying up of resources in the ground as a result of exploitation’ [Gadamer, 1996: 7]), today, when science has become ‘the primary productive factor of the human economy’ (Gadamer, 1996: 6), such practices turn out to have a planetary range and influence Earth-systems as such. Gadamer returns here to the distinction known from *Truth and Method*: while the Greek model of *techne* presumed filling out the possibilities of further development left open by nature, a modern scientific paradigm separating man from the world results in the establishment of an ‘artificial counterpart to reality’ (1996: 6); that is to say: modeling the world

⁷ Such a thesis may seem risky, because the Anthropocene discourse differs fundamentally from the twentieth century discourse of the ‘ecological crisis’. According to Ewa Bińczyk, this difference consists mainly of a different rhetoric: while ecophilosophy and environmental ethics of the twentieth century focused on the problem of responsibility for the continuance of life on Earth, the philosophy of the Anthropocene reveals a far greater pessimism, focusing on ‘a climate catastrophe difficult to avoid and a failure to manage planetary conditions’ (Bińczyk, 2018: 26). However, as I will try to show, even though at the first glance Gadamer fits into the discourse of twentieth century ecology, he also formulated some insights that allow him to be treated as one of the precursors of the Anthropocene philosophy in such a ‘weak’ sense.

⁸ Right now, I pass over the troublesomeness of the concept of ‘nature’ (see for example: Soper, 1995; Vogel, 1996; Latour, 2004; Morton, 2007). Although it is true that Gadamer does not abandon this traditional concept, he indicates that it should at least be redefined (Gadamer, 1996: 12). A similar position, justified by the hermeneutical usefulness of the concept of ‘nature’, is expressed, for example, by W.S.K. Cameron (2014). Another praise of ‘nature’ is provided by Hamilton (2017) who treats it as an enormous force awakened by the human species in the Anthropocene and opposed to it.

according to our own (usually mercantile) interests leading to human hyperagency. The effects of these actions were already alarming for Gadamer: 'the technical exploitation of natural resources and the artificial transformation of our environment has become so carefully planned and extensive that its consequences endanger the natural cycle of things and bring about irreversible developments on a large scale' (1996: 7).

The author of *Truth and Method* blames this state of affairs on 'the superstitious faith in science which strengthens the technocratic unscrupulousness with which technical know-how spreads without restraint' (1996: 7). This critique resembles, of course, Heidegger's analysis of technology as *Ge-Stell*, enframing, that transforms the subject of cognition of modern science into a 'resource', mercilessly exploited raw material (Heidegger, 1977). However, while Heidegger is interested in the 'essence' of technology and the 'forgetfulness of Being' leading, in my opinion, to an unjustified essentialization⁹, Gadamer offers very sober ecological observations:

(...) the consequences of research possess an ever greater human significance. One thinks simply of the development of chemical fertilization, of chemical preservatives, of the problem of waste disposal (not only in the production of atomic energy but above all in the use of synthetic materials), of water and air pollution. How far must science accept the responsibility for this? (1996: 25)

Gadamer's answer to this question resembles to some extent the concept of sustainable development – and he gives that answer one year before the publication of the *Limits of Growth* report and 15 years before the announcement of the next one: *Our Common Future*. The author of *Truth and Method* notices the need to demythologize science, to deprive it of its beliefs about the possibility of providing a technical solution to literally every problem which leads to the question of whether science should perform any action just because it is able to do it. Gadamer is against this, but, what is important here, he does not limit the freedom of scientific research, instead making politics responsible for using the opportunities it creates. The use of scientific inventions must meet not only the current needs and desires, but also – and perhaps primarily –

⁹ See: Caputo, 1993; Rigby, 2004; Garrard, 2010. The opposite notion is presented, for example, by Magdalena Hoły-Luczaj (2018a, 2018b).

‘the future of mankind’ (Gadamer, 1996: 9). It is quite striking, given that the concern for the fate of future generations is one of the main topics of *Our Common Future* report. Gadamer also indicates nature’s limited capacity to recover, which is important for sustainable development as well. Of course, he does not deal with economics in the strict sense, he only notes that the development of science and technology is reflected in economic overexploitation, because there is a domination of the instrumental reason in the logic of science and technology, as well as in economics.¹⁰

The essay *Theory, Technology, Praxis* also suggests the need for a radical reevaluation of anthropocentric belief about the special place of man in space (though the suggestion is not developed). The author of *Truth and Method* treats this belief as a remnant of theology which is impossible to maintain in the light of the findings of such sciences as ethology or behaviorism, which also – interestingly – make us aware of the limitations of traditional hermeneutics: ‘(...) behavior patterns are now being studied which are common to animals and humans and which are wholly inaccessible via such a concept as self-understanding’ (1996: 11).¹¹ This is also related to the critique of the traditional concept of nature as a ‘matter subject to laws’ which manages life frugally (1996: 12). This concept to this day – as Gadamer observes – finds various confirmations, above all in the capitalist model of ‘cheap nature’ as the phantasm of the infinite source of resources that only have a mercantile value and are waiting only for its capitalization.

Many of these theses are then restated, but also radicalized in the essay *The Diversity of Europe*, which without any hesitation can be called the illusion-free diagnosis of the Great Acceleration. Gadamer not only notices there that the industrial revolution

¹⁰ However, it is already known today that the paradigm of sustainable development has been exhausted and certainly will not remedy the climate crisis. Incidentally, a glance at the development of science (and its ever closer connection with economics visible for example in the industry of ‘applied sciences’) indicates that such calls to repentance – formulated from the 1960’s also by other researchers, for example Rachel Carson (1962) or Joseph W. Meeker (1972) – were not heard. A particularly pathological case of the technocratic *hybris*, which in a truly tragic way leads us to a catastrophe, are the ideas of geoengineering and the discourse of the ‘good Anthropocene’ (see: Hamilton, 2013). Also other technological ideas such as carbon capturing are rather hopeless (see: Hamilton, 2010: 159-167).

¹¹ It is worth considering what Gadamer has in mind at this point. As we know, Heidegger (2008) ‘reserved’ the concept of self-understanding for *Dasein*, treating it as a determinant of the human being-in-the-world. Gadamer himself did not exceed this anthropocentric prejudice. Moreover, he clearly indicated the linguistic nature of all understanding as a feature that distinguishes man from other animals. Therefore, the evolutionary patterns of behavior or any similarity between human and non-human animals are inaccessible to him from the point of self-understanding. Nevertheless, as I state at the end of this article, such an approach can no longer be maintained, and one of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene is a significant extension of the problem of understanding, so as to include non-human actors within it.

reached gigantic proportions in the second half of the twentieth century, embracing almost all aspects of human existence, but also penetratingly perceives the internal, core and suicidal logic of this process inevitably transforming the hyperagency of man into his hyperhelplessness:

There is an inviolable law in this process, an iron necessity: not to remain behind. And only in this way can one even create the chances for life and the survival of every-one – yet suddenly just this law has become at the same time a threat to the life and everyone's survival. (...) I mean the inner consistency of these events, which have led us to this critical boundary. For the first time an arsenal of weapons has been created, whose use does not guarantee victory, but would rather result only in the collective suicide of human civilization. And perhaps even more serious – for as far as I know, no one knows how to master this crisis – the ecological crisis, the exhaustion, destruction, and desolation of the natural basis of our home, the earth. These two threats resulted quite logically from the population explosion and at the same time the enormous increase in the standard of living in the developed countries. And today they threaten the human conditions for life in general. (Gadamer, 1992a: 223)

Similarly to *Theory, Technology, Praxis*, Gadamer clearly identifies the culprit of this process: this is a specifically Western, modern concept of science that 'brought things into a new availability' (1992a: 228) and transformed the world 'into a single great factory of industrial work' (1992a: 226). In one of the texts from the same volume as *The Diversity of Europe*, entitled *The Future of the European Humanities*, Gadamer even develops, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2015) notes, a kind of postcolonial reflection indicating that the practices of the mastery of the world by European culture are only 'subtle forms of colonization' (Gadamer, 1992b: 201). Chakrabarty calls this essay 'an intellectual prehistory of the contemporary literature on postcolonial criticism and globalization' (2015: 149) linking the issues presented in it with the problem of 'the human condition in the Anthropocene'. Indeed, the relationship between colonialism and the ecological crisis is irrefutable: it is largely the drainage of natural resources of colonized areas that led to the development of European capitalism and divided the

world into the western welfare states and the poor countries of the so-called Global South, which has enormous consequences today, especially for environmental justice. But, despite noticing these dependencies, Gadamer's postcolonial awareness remains quite poor and perhaps this is the weakest point of his analysis. As Dieter Misgeld states, he treats the humanities as a remedy for European imperialism, but he does not notice that they are a part of this imperialism because they have justified it (Misgeld, 2017). That is why one can take Gadamer's reflections at most as a preparation for reliable postcolonial hermeneutics.¹²

Nevertheless, reflecting on the remedies against an inevitably imminent cataclysm, Gadamer again points to the necessity of a radical reevaluation of the human relation to the world of one's life. He refers to the etymology which will also be important for many ecocritics: '*Domus* means a home in Latin. The Lord at home is also the one who protects and manages *oikos*. (...) we must seek and safeguard the balance between groups of interests, as well as create and protect the balance between the needs of humanity and its condemnation of life in nature' (1992c: 84). And even though nature appears here as a (non-transcendental, biological) condition of the possibility of human being-in-the-world, Gadamer remains very pessimistic about changing the dominant technical-capitalist paradigm: 'I say this in all seriousness, there is no alternative. (...) everyone, who can think and is sincere, knows that there is no alternative' (1992a: 223). Although it sounds like a fatalistic conviction about the inevitability of our fate, unfortunately it is simply a solid, honest diagnosis of the facticity, that is to say, the actual hermeneutic situation in which we find ourselves. Gadamer is devoid of illusion: 'everyone involved in the political or economic process is very conscious of the fact that we are slowly approaching, in the West and the East, the border zone of life and survival. And we must see that the avoidance of a crossing of the border is in everyone's interest' (1992a: 223).

What is this 'lack of alternative' that Gadamer talks about? Firstly – again unlike Heidegger – he points to the lack of the possibility of retreat from technology, which not only increased the standard of people's lives (at least in the West) to an unprecedented level, but also made their further survival dependent on itself. Starting from the

¹² While I find postcolonial hermeneutics an important issue to be developed in the near future, especially within the horizon of environmental justice and interspecies solidarity, I do not address it here in details. In this paper, it is only an additional context. I believe it requires separate, independent reflection.

everyday functioning of households, through the entire food industry or transport, to the remedies for the problems created by itself, it strictly fills up the world of modern man – so its breakdown would cause an equally enormous collapse.

Secondly, I suppose that Gadamer is referring here to the capitalist model of consumption and economic growth, which has never really been questioned in any country in the globalized world – there are also no announcements that this will happen in the near future. Meanwhile, as Brian Treanor points out (2018), the more we consume, the more strongly we escalate climate change in return. Economic growth which is fetishized by the capitalist regime is based on an ever faster, more aggressive and increasingly devastating drainage of natural resources of the Earth, while completely ignoring the internal contradiction of its own logic, not taking into account the ‘limits of growth’, to refer once again to the report from 1973.

I believe that a deep conviction about the ‘lack of alternative’ allowed Gadamer to see one more dependency that was fully heard when the latest IPCC reports were published. The point is that there is no way to avoid a certain climatic chaos and the only thing left to do is to make its effects as harmless as possible (see: Hamilton, 2010: 1-31). Gadamer writes in this context: ‘Only a directing and guiding of the processes which are already occurring can perhaps allow for the survival of everyone. And this will require of us all still different efforts than those in economics or foreign affairs’ (1992a: 223).

Therefore, the author of *Truth and Method* predicts that in the face of the coming ‘end of the world as we know it’¹³ there is a fundamental ‘task of humanity’¹⁴ before us: ‘We do not know whether there will be catastrophes or a growing poverty or the arduous work of limiting and guiding the one-dimensional will, which pushes forward, as if driven by its own law, heading toward self-destruction’ (Gadamer, 1992a: 229). These words seem profoundly prophetic. There is no better confirmation of them than the growing crisis of ‘climate migrations’. As noted by Serpil Oppermann, the main causes of migration (both human and non-human) today are ‘the negative impacts of anthropogenic climate change’ (2017: 243), connected with social conflicts (2017: 249)

¹³ See: Wallerstein, 1999.

¹⁴ I believe that this translation requires some comment. While it can be understood as a task that all humanity has to undertake, there is also another possible meaning, in this context even more important for me, which would underline rather a task of being human, of reacting humanly to what we experience. This notion has been extracted in the Polish translation, and in this sense Naomi Klein said something similar a few years ago: ‘climate change will test our moral character like little before’ (2014: 73).

and wars which are called, not without reason, 'climate wars' or 'resources wars' (see Welzer, 2012; Klare, 2001). No doubt Chakrabarty is right (2015: 147) when he states that the climate crisis means a fundamental change in the human condition. On its face, Gadamer's 'task of humanity' appears to be one of the most pressing moral and political challenges. It means, at the least, the need for a fundamental rethinking of our national and cultural identities, the problem of boundaries, and the redistribution of shrinking natural resources among many other issues.

Hermeneutics at the Time of the Anthropocene

However, does this all entitle us to call Gadamer the precursor of the Anthropocene discourse and to include his thought within the environmental humanities? It seems there is one particularly important limitation here, which is Gadamer's anthropocentrism. It is difficult to disagree with Chakrabarty when he notices that the perspective of the author of *Truth and Method* remains 'profoundly homocentric' (2015: 152), operating within the horizon of the discourse of 'globalization', for which ecological threats are identical to the threats to human well-being. It is significant that while many ecocritics today point to the need for establishing a post-anthropocentric paradigm, Gadamer pushes for a deep humanism in his 'task of humanity'. According to Chakrabarty, this attitude is due to the lack of appropriate interdisciplinary tools: 'astronomical scales for space, geological scales for time, and scales of evolutionary time for the history of life', which enable the 'understanding [of] the relationship between the history of the planet's atmosphere and its life-carrying capacity (...)' (Chakrabarty, 2015: 154).

Nevertheless, although Gadamer remains a humanist in his philosophy, he manages to transcend that perspective at least in some places. The extracts from *The Diversity of Europe*, in which nature is treated as a partner of human being are particularly noteworthy here:

Nature can no longer be viewed as a mere object for exploitation, it must be experienced as a partner in all its appearances; but that means it must be understood as the other with whom we live together. (...) We may perhaps

survive as humanity if we would be able to learn that we may not simply exploit our means of power and effective possibilities, but must learn to stop and respect the other as an other, whether it is nature or the grown cultures of peoples and nations; and if we would be able to learn to experience the other and the others, as the other of our self, in order to participate with one another. (Gadamer, 1992a: 232-236)

It seems here that there occurs a significant overcoming of traditional humanism. For the hermeneutic community to experience nature as a partner, as the other with whom we participate in each other, it means its radical extension, openness to non-human actors, recognition of their agency and fundamental connection between human and them. What is at stake in this game is by no means the utopian giving up on human speciesism. On the contrary, this is – no more, no less – the survival of life (human and non-human) on Earth. After all, we are rather interdependent selves than independent ones (see: Hamilton, 2010: 152-158). So, one could say that the alternative to this *extension* is *extinction*. And although this is only a ‘moment’ in Gadamer’s reflection, he comes here to grips with Chakrabarty’s postulate to replace the homocentric perspective with a zoocentric one that shows ‘humans on an expanded canvas of history, spanning the geological history of the planet and the story of life on it’ (2015: 142). In this context, the ‘task of humanity’ would be primarily a task of being more-than-human.

The fundamental change of the human condition at the times of the Anthropocene consist mainly of the need to recognize a man not as the center of the world, but as one of the elements of a biotic community. As Kate Rigby rightly states: ‘the fact that ever more of the earth’s surface is currently being refashioned by *techne* does not mean that *physis* has ceased to exist. All human making, including the largely unintentional remaking (or rather, undoing) of the earth’s ecosystems, remains dependent upon the physical processes which precede and exceed human knowledge and power’ (2002: 154). In a sense, Gadamer had already pointed that out in *Truth and Method* in his analysis of the phenomenon of play as something that grows out of nature and is a part of its process, not something distinctive for a human being (2004: 105). Also elsewhere in his magnum opus he noticed that ‘human existence [is] based on something outside history – i.e., on nature’ (2004: 253).

It is not only a question of the 'ontology' of human existence, but the actual practices of co-existence of people with non-human others, which can be treated as concretizations of Gadamer's partnership with nature or even as transgressions of his rather limited reflection on nonhuman nature, heading towards establishing of a more-than-human community. Examples of such practices would be as follows: paying attention to nature's '*autopoiesis*' and giving it the priority over the human *poiesis* and *techne*, described by Rigby (2004); the model of 'kinship' promoted by Donna J. Haraway (2015), according to which no species of living beings act alone, all beings are close and interrelated; Keller's postulate (1998) to develop a model of science conscious of a community that connects people with the world and other beings and environmentally sensitive decision-making procedures separating the proper usages of techniques from the inappropriate (harmful, leading to loss of biodiversity, destroying habitats of particular species, etc.); and above all recognition that climate justice must concern both interpersonal relations and the revaluation of human-nonhuman relations.

It is the question of climate justice that emphasizes the fact that 'the task of humanity' is also a task of being more-than-human, and responding 'humanly' to climate change means also to implement an interspecies solidarity (see: Rigby, 2008: 24; Coulter, 2016). This is well illustrated by the wordplay of Donna Haraway: 'right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge' (2015: 160). Yet, although the above concepts and beliefs do not originate directly from the hermeneutic tradition and although the Gadamer's discourse is subject to anthropocentric constraints, I think that such practices can be treated as the concretizations of a certain hermeneutic consciousness of the historical process recognized as the Anthropocene. As we have seen, it is already Gadamer who (at least partly) managed to diagnose this process and thus go beyond the humanistic perspective. Nevertheless, the openness to the problem of the non-human is provided by 'the *logical structure of openness* that characterizes hermeneutical consciousness' (2004: 356) and obliges it to adequately respond to the challenges of its own historicity. In this sense, David Utsler is absolutely right: 'All forms of environmental identity are inherently hermeneutical or, at the very least, are best conceptually explained with the help of hermeneutics' (Utsler, 2014: 127). And if this is indeed the case, hermeneutic philosophy itself must recognize the challenges it faces in the Anthropocene epoch in order to exceed many of its previous limitations.

One of these challenges is the need to extend the concept of understanding. This extension needs to occur in two directions: firstly, towards involving non-human actors in our practices of understanding, including them within the hermeneutic community and, exactly as Gadamer postulated in *The Diversity of Europe*, treating them as (equal, as one may add) partners of hermeneutic dialogue. In this case it would be particularly useful to show Gadamer's notion of 'understanding' referring to the 'legal' etymology of the German word *verstehen*, which means 'standing up for somebody', 'representing', 'speaking from oneself as someone else and addressing others' (Gadamer, 2003: 148). With regard to the understanding of non-human actors, it would mean the practice of representing their interests or speaking on their behalf, related to such thinkers as Bruno Latour (2004) and his notion of spokespersons speaking for otherwise mute non-humans or Lawrence Buell, who talks about 'raising the interests of the non-human to the same level on which we consider the interests of human beings, or even higher' (Fiedorczuk, 2015: 212).

Secondly, the very concept of understanding should be extended to non-human actors so as to embrace their intentionality, their understanding and experience of the world, their languages or non-linguistic communication systems, biological processes of meaning-making so far only relevant to biosemiotics, the whole agency of non-human actors. This would require a definite overcoming of the conviction that understanding is a distinctive feature of human being and admitting that it belongs to non-human beings as well. And although it seems that this would lead to the rejection of Gadamer's anthropocentric hermeneutics, in fact, a similar suggestion is to be found in his work when, referring to Aristotle, he notices that at least some animals have the sense of *phronesis* and when he states: "The fact that in the seventeenth century intelligence ceases to be the ability to recognize principles and means the general ability to recognize things, facts, relations, etc., puts man basically in the same line with intelligent animals' (Gadamer, 2008: 182-183). This does not necessarily mean a radical change in the humanistic paradigm, but indicates that Gadamer had done some basic work in this topic, which was later developed by many ecocritics and posthumanists.

One more hermeneutic concept for which the Anthropocene poses a serious challenge is the 'world', and especially the 'life-world'. This is a very important phenomenological term for Gadamer meaning 'the world in which we are immersed in

the natural attitude that never becomes an object as such for us, but that represents the pregiven basis of all experience' (2004: 239).¹⁵ As one can read in English version of *Truth and Method*, 'the life-world is always at the same time a communal world that involves being with other people as well' (2004: 239). Now, it is quite important for me that the English version closes the possibility of ecological interpretation of this extract, which remains open both in the German original and in the Polish translation. For in the original *Wahrheit und Methode* one reads about 'Mitdasein' (Gadamer, 1990: 252) and this is not necessarily 'being [only] with other people'. This can also mean: being with others *other than people*. In the same way 'a communal world' ('eine Gemeinschaftliche Welt') can – and should – involve the non-human others, which was obvious to Gadamer himself.

However, from the perspective of the Anthropocene, 'the life-world' turns out to be something very fragile, and perhaps even something to which we have to say goodbye. As Chakrabarty notes (2015: 183), the epochal consciousness of the Anthropocene is thrown into the deep (geological) history of the world, which shows the fragility of all homocentric cultural orders. This is also suggested by the proposal of 'Global Warming criticism' by Jonathan Bate (1996). Such kind of criticism, in the words of Kate Rigby, 'presupposes a natural world which can no longer be thought of as passive, orderly and compliant, but which is rather volatile, unpredictable and responsive to our interventions in the ways that we can neither foresee nor control' (2008: 159). Although, of course, Gadamer's 'life-world' is devoid of the attributes of constancy and closure too, Global Warming criticism significantly changes the rules of the game, or rather, deprives us of any rules: it indicates that the planetary boundaries, behind which there is nothing but the climatic chaos and unpredictability of being, have been crossed.

Similar diagnoses are also the starting point for Timothy Morton, stressing with all his strength that the 'end of the world' is not a threat we face, but something that has already happened. What he means is the operativeness of the philosophical concept of the world as a (friendly) place of human life, subject to certain laws, discoverable, modelable and inhabitable (Morton, 2013).¹⁶ In fact, the Anthropocene discourse is full

¹⁵ This is of course the notion taken by Gadamer from Edmund Husserl.

¹⁶ Morton links this 'end of the world' with the appearance of hyperobjects – the monstrous 'products' of the Anthropocene which completely escaped its intentionality and control, confronting us with an unknowable,

of analogical diagnoses. It is indeed the very meaning of the term 'Anthropocene' which describes, as Clive Hamilton reminds us, 'a *rupture* in the functioning of a Earth system as a whole', not simply 'the continued spread of human impacts on the landscape or further modification to ecosystems' (2017: 10).

Using Gadamer's language, the challenges facing us in the Anthropocene epoch take the form of a radical *atopon*: 'something that is devoid of space, that cannot be drawn into the patterns of our expectations towards understanding and that – for this reason – amazes us' (Gadamer, 2003: 7). And although Gadamer emphasizes that *atopon* is not what stops the movement of understanding, but what initiates it, the task of understanding in the face of such atopic problem as the Anthropocene turns out to be more difficult than ever before.

In conclusion, the proto-diagnosis of the Anthropocene made by Gadamer can be seen as hermeneutics 'in action'. It shows how hermeneutic understanding of history of effect and responding to its call works in practice, and it proves the usefulness of hermeneutics for conceptualizing the issue of the Anthropocene. Gadamer himself noticed the historical process of the Anthropocene and formulated important hermeneutic insights, however, as I tried to prove, challenges of the Anthropocene, indicating a sharp shift of our hermeneutic horizon, require even more radical responses. They are formulated within the Anthropocene discourse which, for this reason, can be viewed as a radical hermeneutic practice of understanding.

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