An important theme in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Climate of History in the Planetary Age* is how the Anthropocene crisis raises Kant’s four questions, “What can I know?,” “What should I do?,” “What can I hope for?,” and the crucially important question, “What is Man?” anew. I follow up on Chakrabarty’s references to the twentieth-century German philosophical anthropologists, which included Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, and others for whom the fourth question was also urgent. Hans Blumenberg, part of this tradition and avidly interested in paleoanthropology, reformulated Kant’s question as “What made humans possible?” Given threats to planetary habitability, my question is whether this reformulation and Blumenberg’s account of competencies that made humans possible in our evolutionary history can enrich “efforts of humanists in collectively thinking our way toward a new philosophical anthropology?” How might this reformulation aid in rediscovering a “commons,” even though “humans are politically not-one,” the problem Chakrabarty interrogates in *One Planet, Many Worlds*.1

For the German anthropologists, humans are fundamentally “world open,” or underdetermined, and defined by profound orientation needs that motivate securing a lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*]. Blumenberg claims that neither human biological existence nor the background conditions for existence can be taken for granted. So, the central anthropological question is “how this creature is able to exist”2—a question the Anthropocene has made us all too aware of, especially given the human creature’s outsize impact on planetary processes. Chakrabarty expresses the same thought:

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“Humans are a product of contingencies in the history of life on this planet. The planet does not return our gaze in that we cannot assume any relation of mutuality with it.”

The Anthropocene has brought us face to face with certain non-negotiable, anthropological limits. Let me very briefly outline how Blumenberg understands the parameters within which the competencies that made us possible emerged, which may offer further elaboration of Chakrabarty’s anthropology.

The key for Blumenberg—and arguably for us—is maintaining “distance” from what would make us impossible. Drawing on Gehlen’s idea of the Mängelwesen [deficient being], Blumenberg proposes a hypothetical yet scientifically-informed anthropogenesis, arguing that humans became possible by acquiring modes of “distance” from the overwhelming threat posed by losing control of “the conditions of existence” or “believing we have lost control of the conditions of existence.” As our bipedal species became unspecialized, with maximal flexibility for adaptation, it became extremely vulnerable to contingencies. So, over the millennia, humans compensated by becoming second-natured, cultural beings, whose different lifeworlds of practices, institutions, metaphors, and stories evaded extinction only so long as those modes were not “contradicted by reality.” This entailed moving away from—not toward—an anxiety-provoking disorientation, which Blumenberg sums up as the “absolutism of reality.” Given our current predicament of climate change, biodiversity loss, accelerated technological change, and extractive capitalism, we can clearly discern that “the current condition of existence” we find ourselves in “contradicts” what makes us and what we depend on possible. To remain human means relieving the pressure of mere survival, of what Chakrabarty refers to as a “sense of an abject creaturehood” in the face of the overpowering presence of the planetary. Thus, Blumenberg’s focus on the need for humans to distance themselves from the

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3 One Planet, 6.

4 Work on Myth, 4-6. Blumenberg also refers to this limit condition as the terminus a quo of existence. Similar to Kant, the immensity of nature plus the awareness of the insufficiency of our faculties forces us to find our own limitations, or not survive. It is a boundary concept put in place by our own biological underdetermination and so becomes the conceptual horizon for understanding the lifeworld as compensation.
“condition of existence” finds itself repeated and amplified by the current ecological crisis. To maintain the conditions of our own possibility, we must find ways to distance ourselves from a descent into a twenty-first century Hobbesian state of nature or what Chakrabarty refers to as “rebarbarization.”5 As Blumemberg would say: naked self-preservation is not what human life can live with.6

The shared catastrophes of the Anthropocene, in affecting the boundary conditions of life, thus represent an historically emergent “absolutism,” which both Blumenberg and Chakrabarty would trace to modern “forgetting.” For Chakrabarty, we have forgotten or ignored the “deep, geobiological histories of life and the planet” and have lost a sense of “reverence” for our environment.7 For Blumenberg modernity’s claim to a new foundation forbade itself to “have a history,” destroying “in barbaric fashion a meaningful historical context,” aiming to sweep away the prejudices of the past.8 At this point, anxiety about planetary habitability reflects the inheritance of the “questions”9 suppressed [forgotten] by the successes of modernity’s embrace of an open-ended instrumental rationality that ignored and continues to ignore the difference between planetary and human time-scale differences as well as our radical dependence on and entanglement in a finite natural/social world. Those denials now exert pressures, the “rifts” and “fault lines” “in the landscape of our thought,” that motivate Chakrabarty’s questioning of the human condition and the deficits of modernist politics.

5 The Climate of History in a Planetary Age, 91.


8 Legitimacy, 146-47. The discussion here is Descartes and Bacon’s references to prejudices and “idols” from the past that are to be swept away.

9 Blumemberg uses this term to refer to the blindspots in epochal presuppositions, which since denied erupt as problems that need solving.
I return to another very abbreviated account: the anthropological “constants” Blumenberg claims made us possible in our evolutionary history: the concept, saving time, consolation, and resilience. Anthropologically, bipedalism entailed a wider horizon and led to “reason” as a capacity for prevention and foresight, which is neither disembodied nobility nor instrumental reason divorced from the conditions of existence. It is a “principle of insufficient reason,” a pragmatic reason born of trial and error. Saving time [Zeitgewinn] designates the gradual transformation of the animal that flees into one that creates distance.\(^\text{10}\) Mediating impulses, processing emotion, and assimilating and transmitting cultural learning take time. Humans cannot begin anew at every moment or with every generation. Saving time now would mean retarding the pace of change to avoid being used up as a species—creating distance. As Chakrabarty states: we need to scale “back the realm of the human-modern.”\(^\text{11}\) Consolation [Trost] was “decisive in anthropogenesis”; it made human contingency bearable, soothing the anxieties arising from existential vulnerabilities that cannot be gained.\(^\text{12}\) Making “kin across difference,”\(^\text{13}\) depends on strengthening this capacity. The above supports the fourth constant: “resilience,” a flexible stability, or “optimization” of modes of maintaining distance, which are necessarily plural, historically conditioned, and reflect limitations and dependencies.\(^\text{14}\) “Success is not programmed in.”\(^\text{15}\)

Contemplating “how a being without a nature is possible within nature” could become a meditation on the conditions of our possibility amidst the accelerating and excessive demands on the human creature that must distance itself from absolutes,

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\(^{10}\) Beschreibung des Menschen, (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2014), 616. Hereafter, BDM.

\(^{11}\) One Planet, 42.

\(^{12}\) BDM, 626.

\(^{13}\) See the chapter entitled “Staying with the Present,” in One Planet.

\(^{14}\) BDM, 591.

\(^{15}\) BDM, 524.
construct “detours,”\textsuperscript{16} modes of relying on people, other species, institutions, narratives, and resources that contain possible points of attachment or recognition, and then engage in critical reflection. Modernity’s deficits have made visible the need for an anthropology that can specify these requirements absent biological or metaphysical guarantees. The many Anthropocene narratives render these issues blindingly clear, confronting us with the pressure on all species from the unintended consequences of our successful colonization of every environment on the planet—including human nervous systems. Despite this, many advocate rushing headlong into an inhuman techno-algorithmic-future on a burning planet, which threatens losing control of the “conditions of existence.”\textsuperscript{17}

The “Anthropocene” represents an epochal shift and set of parameters bracketed by two limits: rock, metaphorically suggesting either the futility of human agency or a Promethean technical mastery. Stratigrapher Jan Zalasiewicz writes: “to be useful to geologists, the Anthropocene must be thought of not just as history, but as rock, as strata…that geologists can map,” as though the human species has died out.\textsuperscript{18} At the other extreme, humans are geological “forces” competing with and potentially dominating nature, extending the progress narrative into an inhuman open temporal horizon. A further iteration is the planetary steward: technological prowess as a geological force for good. Paul Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl write: “It’s no longer us against Nature. Instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be.”\textsuperscript{19} These two extremes—rock and mastery—signify the historically specific

\textsuperscript{16} Blumenberg uses the term “detours” to refer to the fact that the human relation to reality must be indirect, e.g., through narrative, metaphor, and supporting institutions.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, see Marc Andreeseen’s “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto: https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/

\textsuperscript{18} Rickards, Lauren, “Metaphor and the Anthropocene,” 283, 284. See also, David Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming. To examine metaphors is not to say that the epoch in which we live cannot be called the Anthropocene in a scientific sense. The human record will be left in rocks.

parameters—the “absolutes”—from which the species must distance itself. At our peril, fearing extinction, we may imagine and then try to decide what nature will be.\(^\text{20}\)

Philosophical anthropology addresses species limits and capacities that are common to all of us, but we do not act as a species. So, can asking what made us possible provide guidance in relation to the above? Can it point us in the direction of healthy distance? Continuing to interrogate the conditions of our existence may clear possibility spaces that reference what is common amidst difference. For example, as both Blumenberg and Chakrabarty would say: what does it mean in specific situations to accept our ontological entanglement and dependence, to recognize what it means to be rational, to retard the pace of change, to develop empathy across difference [make “kin”], and to stay with an anxiety-provoking present long enough to allow humane political paths to emerge? Can we transform existential anxiety into fear and fear into the awe and “reverence on which all ancient, Indigenous, and even peasant religions were based” that Chakrabarty claims we have forgotten and that could create breathing space?\(^\text{21}\) Bruno Latour, one of Chakrabarty’s frequent interlocutors, sensed the rise of an “ecological class,” particularly among young people and those who embrace a new “cosmology” of dependencies—a new metaphysical narrative based on interconnectedness and “regeneration.” Regenerative societies and collectives at the local and bioregional levels are sprouting up across the globe. These are hopeful signs, and they are modes of anthropological distance, but whether such manifestations of a changing consciousness can sufficiently retard the forces unleashed by the modernist- capitalist-neoliberal order is an open question.

\(^\text{20}\) Chakrabarty mentions the kind of “distance” promoted by geoengineers, such as David Keith in One Planet, 79. This is exactly the opposite of the type of distance our anthropology calls for.

\(^\text{21}\) Blumenberg, writing before planetary changes of the magnitude we face were quite as obvious [in Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne], proposed that we meditate on the immensity of time and space (innumerable galaxies) and the powerlessness of Wissen. The size of the universe and recognizing the improbability of our form of existence may decenter us and possibly deflate narcotizing and grandiose narratives—perhaps bringing us back to a life-worldly form of existence.