Earth Citizens: Plessner's Political Anthropology

in the Age of Climate Change*

> "Europe is ground zero when it comes to impacts [from climate change]…2026 is just the beginning. It will inevitably get worse. It will get worse and worse and worse to the point where, I'm afraid, we'll be passing the limits of adaptation."[1]
> (Johan Rockström, Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research)

> "We need to love and respect the Earth with the same intensity that we give our families and our tribe."[2]
> (James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*)

Europe is on Fire

As I sit down to write this address, Europe is ablaze: in France, the vast fires have triggered the evacuation of 220,000 people. The French Government said that "More than 116,000 hectares of forest and vegetation have been burned since January, far exceeding the 70,000 hectares reported for the whole of 2025;"[3] "in 2026, 295,405 hectares have burned in Spain — 210% above the 20-year average."[4] The forest fires could continue to November. The fires accompany a summer of record-breaking heatwaves throughout Europe: Italy peaked at 48.4°C; France reached a high of 44.3°C; Germany climbed to a new all-time high of 41.7°C in Coschen on June 28;[5] average temperatures in Europe over June and July were some 2.79°C above their historical average.[6] Europe's great rivers – including the Rhine, Danube, Po, the Loire and the Seine – that are vital for agriculture and drinking water are drying up, already at record lows.[7] Elsewhere, Canada reported 645 active wildfires, and 35,143 fires for the year to date; roughly 4.5 million hectares (11.2 million acres) have burned so far this year. [8] Meanwhile, throughout

Asia there have been torrential rains and floods breaking previous records.[9] And there are imminent dangers approaching: we are likely heading toward the worst El Niño in recorded history.[10]

The climate disruptions to everyday life across the globe are only indications of deeper disruptions: CO2 emissions into the atmosphere have risen from an average 285ppm during the pre-industrial era to 429.21ppm in July of this year, which is well beyond the 350 ppm safe level. Temperatures have risen 1.35^0C relative to the pre-industrial (1850-1900) average. Heat, deforestation, severe weather, flooding, and habitat destruction could well lead to a sixth mass extinction.

Anthropocentric humanism has been the reigning social ontology of the modern world; in it only human lives have unconditional value, and the natural world in all its wonders and ecological munificence is there for us to use, enjoy, and exploit as we see fit. Today, Europe is ablaze because a once emancipatory social ontology of anthropocentric humanism has advanced and expanded through an historically unique joining of human rapacity (in the guise of an ever-expanding global free market economic system: capitalism), with superlative scientific knowledge and technological brilliance that have, in their unprecedented synthesis, led to the overstepping of the natural boundaries that have made human civilization possible. Over the course the past seventy-five years, a wealthy and powerful portion of humanity has destroyed the ecological munificence of the geological epoch of Holocene nature that began just 11,700 years ago; Holocene nature provided a uniquely *self-regulating, stable, temperate, and resilient* climate system; those four characteristics, each capable of quantitative

specification, constitute Holocene normativity. Holocene nature provided the planetary conditions of possibility that, once upon a time, allowed our nomadic hunting-and-gathering ancestors to stop wandering the Earth, to invent farming, to build cities, to develop writing, to undertake the study of the natural world, to create modernity's advanced sciences and powerful technologies, to forge vast empires and colonies, to create a truly global economy, and, in some portions of the world, to produce historically high standards of human living. All these achievements, in their dynamic unfolding, are leading toward an impending civilizational downfall: a perturbing of Holocene nature that is widely designated by the concept *the Anthropocene.*

Climate change is a climate catastrophe that has not been addressed effectively by the global political community. And this raises an ever more urgent question: how can we explain the failure of populations throughout the most advanced societies to politically act while their own future lives and, especially, the lives of their children and their children's children, are being made more precarious, more mortally threatened, more impossible across a wide range of dimensions?

My organizing hypothesis is that the deepest stratum of the political blockage is, perhaps surprisingly, a philosophical blockage: what has been radically missing from most of the high-level conversations about climate change is the demand for a radical and thoroughgoing transformation of the self-understanding of the human being, the demand for a deep reimagining of the meaning of being human from some version of anthropocentric humanism to a conception of the human as utterly dependent on, immersed in and answerable to the

ecological contours of Holocene living nature. This latter framing would thus view civilizational humanity as having always been nothing other than a living part of a living environment who, through originally reckless and later collective criminal behavior, has become responsible for the ongoing destruction of its own natural home: Holocene nature. What has been missing from our political conversation is a civilizational philosophical self-understanding of who we humans are *as ecologically bounded living and historical beings*. I will argue that the most promising and felicitous philosophical vocabulary for the Anthropocene is a suitably ecologically refined updating of Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology and political anthropology which, in turn, will require critical elaboration through the deliverances of Earth system science.[11] Contemporary Earth system science, I argue, should now be interpreted as itself a version of political anthropology.

Boundary Regimes as Ecology

Plessner's philosophical masterstroke was to overcome the dualism between reductive materialism (scientism) and worldless idealist individualism through introducing the framework of organismal biology. In Plessner's pathbreaking construction, organisms are the kinds of beings that have *boundaries* and *positionality*. Living organisms do not have an external contour, shape, or position *in* space; rather, each organism maintains a boundary that protects what is within while also being open to what is outside as a source of nutrients. Organisms spatialize themselves by taking a position with respect to what is outside, and they temporalize themselves through a continuous activity of sustaining the relation between inside and outside.

As Hans-Peter Krüger eloquently states the idea: "The mutual attunement and interplay between the living being and its field of positionality encompass the entire spectrum ranging from struggle to peace, danger to protection, death to harmony, and disequilibrium to equilibrium—embracing the possibilities inherent in and arising from the living being itself."[12]

Nonetheless, what Plessner takes for granted, what makes his original philosophical anthropology a *Holocene* philosophical anthropology, is that the relation between inside and outside for any *species* of organism must itself be *sustainable* (*Nachaltig*) through time and across generations. While sustainable relations amongst a community of organisms of different species is directly implied by evolutionary theory, ecology studies the ongoing sustainability of species of organisms in environments.[13] As became increasingly evident in the course of the past century, comprehending how an ecological habitat is sustained through the structure of its particular species' interdependencies is as central to biological existence as is the structure of organisms themselves. Failure to understand the centrality of the ecological integrity of an environment for life, Rachel Carson argued, made the biological and chemical sciences of her time "neanderthal" sciences.[14] Ecology, almost from the outset, has been the study of habitat interdependencies in relation to their disturbance by human actions of deforestation and land clearing, habitant fragmentation, overexploitation (overfishing, over-hunting), pollution (of soil, air, and water), mining, the introduction of invasive species, unsustainable agriculture, urbanization, and now climate change.

It is in virtue of the necessity of a sustainable regime of boundary-crossing-and-boundary-maintenance, the levels of the organic have an ecological structure, that is, a temporally sustainable complex structure of relations among organisms, including organism dependencies,

repulsions, parasitisms, habitats, and the like; in other words, a mutating system of cooperations and antagonisms, assimilations and dissimilations.

Political Anthropology

For Plessner, the human is distinct from its animal kin in being immature at birth, in being wholly behaviorally unready to engage the world on its own and fully dependent on parents and community caregivers for its survival. This immaturity is ontologically radical; the human infant is also born as permanently stripped of biologically given, evolutionarily engineered boundary sustaining behaviors; the human is born in a condition of permanent biological lack, that is, the lack of an instinctual system sufficient for individual and species survival. The inference Plessner draws from this condition of permanent biological lack is that "The human only lives [survives] when it somehow leads a life" through participating in historically generated and historically determined social practices, through becoming socialized by and into historically contoured cultural norms, social rituals, and authoritative laws.[15] It is the full characterization of biological deficiency compensated for by cultural creation that is fulcrum of philosophical anthropology, human natural artificiality, that immediately opens onto the role of the political in human life.

In the midst of a pivotal argument in which Plessner is distinguishing philosophical anthropology from Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophy of life, he introduces a philosophical theorem that could not have been anticipated. Plesser queries:

> Is philosophical anthropology possible only as political anthropology? Perhaps; only with a view to the human as power and ability does the human remain an open question…*Politics then is not primarily a field but the state of human life in which it gives itself its constitution and asserts itself against and in the world, not just externally and juridically but from out of its ground and essence. Politics is the horizon in which the human acquires the relations that make sense of itself and the world, the entire a priori of its saying and doing*" (PA 61; italics JMB).

Philosophical anthropology is possible only as a political anthropology because each form of life is only an historically and categorially unique experiment in the meaning of being human, a collectively created historical formation that is necessarily open to further revision and redetermination, to collapse and rebirth. One defining feature of Plessner's theory is the notion of the created-and-to-be-created and self-determining standing of each human form of life where the created portion is the compensatory answer to the biological lack of a given behavioral repertoire sufficient for individual and collective survival. An equally defining feature of Plessner's theory, however, is his raising into the domain of political anthropology the language of justice, *Gerechtigkeit*, as it was understood in Weimar under the auspices of the philosophy of law, das *Recht*, with particular emphasis on constitutional law.[16] Whether or not a form of life has an explicit political domain, it is *constituted* by a series of basic principles and categories that are its *constitution*; consequently, the historical constitution of a human community implies that, in its ground and essence it is self-constituting; hence, each form of life gives itself a constitution, knowingly or unknowingly, explicitly or only implicitly. In having a constitution, each human form of life can and must take its governing norms and laws to be

objectively binding and valid – even if it mistakes the source of that bindingness or tries to repudiate it. A society's constitutional principles constitute the meaning of being human for that society; that is why a constitution provides "the entire a priori of [a people's] saying and doing." Aligning the material a priori principles of a form of life with its political constitution in this manner is a radically modern and, in my understanding, novel elaboration of Aristotle's doctrine that the human is a *zoon politikon* that reframes the doctrine of 'the political' in a manner that is richer and more compelling than its development in either Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* or Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*.[17]

The original title of Plessner's book was *Machte und menschliche Natur, Power and Human Nature*. Part of the purpose of Plessner's argument is to give the concept of power a meaning distinct from the sense of might – as in "might makes right" –, and so distinct from power over, power to do, and will-to-power. Power should not be reduced to force. For Plessner, the core phenomena of human power is the powerfulness of making and creating, how each interpretation of the human – the Dilthey connection – is a remaking or reconstitution of the human in its worldly habitation. Humans are radical niche constructing and worldmaking beings. It follows from the powerfulness of worldmaking that each making of the human constitutes how the human ought to be; hence power represents the normative powerfulness, that is, the material *a priori* authority of a people's political-metaphysical constitution of the human.

An historically elaborated human form of life that has wrenched itself out of an open history with all its contingencies, failures and lost opportunities, remains nonetheless

> significant and worth living precisely in what it variously is and was—the human has to *institute* a "natural" order *as the just order*. The institution of the Law is a *discovery* of what is right and what is just because *the human does not invent anything that it does not discover*… Every statute is the attempt to compensate for the inherent incongruence [*wesenhafte Inkongruenz*] of the situation of the human within the human situation itself, a productive possibility of *re*storing [through cultural creation] what has never been [naturally given] by securing what is truly just. Enforcing statutory Law is the sense of organizing power, including its technically most complicated form, the state. (PA 59; italics JMB)

I interpret the "the inherent incongruence of the situation of the human within the human situation itself" as the human being alive in the midst of other, nonhuman living beings and nonliving nature without, once more, biologically secured behavioral capacities to make living possible; only authoritative laws and the constitutive rules of the social practices through which we lead our lives make living possible. Hence, what can appear as only power – only the force and might of state laws and state power – is in actuality the humanly-determined organization of life, namely, how *We justly and rightly* stay alive.

Justice, Plessner is arguing, steps into the absence of biologically, evolutionarily determined boundary-regulating behaviors by determining social practices that must appear as natural, as second nature, and as thus, *ceteris paribus*, unconditionally valid, just, and right. Because law institutes or installs the human in the midst of its living environment, what is truly just affects not only what is morally or ethically right; Plessner's argument is that the experience of a legal arrangement of the human as just or unjust goes to the essence and

meaning of the human: "What is right is a basic characteristic of the human situation insofar as in this situation, *everything* can be addressed as to whether it is right, fair, and just… What is right determines the categorial constitution of human life as a life that is interpreted and interpretable *[ausgelegt- auslegbar, gedeutet-deutbar*]" (PA 59; italics JMB). To institute a form of living that involves the construction of a material habitat with its distinct modes of interaction with the natural environment and an ethical constitution that provides social cohesion in the undertaking of cooperative and coordinated behaviors is to both offer an interpretation of the human and to make human living interpretable in general.[18] But that claim to interpretability fails unless the terms of our life with others rise to a level beyond that of instrumentality, wherein others are solely the necessary means for life. Justice designates the material a priori authority of a formation of the human, of what is "natural" for a formation of the human in the absence of natural determination.

Plessner claims that the categorial constitution of our lives together — as having a constitutional, justice, legal and rights-respecting character — is already present with and through the operation of pronouns: "The delimitation of the spheres of what is mine, yours, ours, everyone's operated in being able to say *I* and *You* and *We* is already an *attribution*. It does not have an explicitly juridical character, but it does necessitate a legal organization of life in all its manifestations" (PA 59). Justice is an essential element of political anthropology; any competing conception of the human that erases the categorial understanding of justice betrays the human.

Ecological Justice: A Swerve within the Political Anthropology

Sotto voce, the previous section argued that the focus on the role of Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction as the pivot or anchor of "the political" in Plessner's political anthropology (PA 83-7) is an error. The political refers to the thorough-going Justice, Law, Rights construction of the human world, that every form of life is a constitutional order even when it lacks a constitution or state form; and that a constitutional order is, in each case, a categorial constitution of the meaning of being human for which a society either takes full responsibility or fails the terms of its institution in human history. I shall return to the friend-enemy question below.

Over the past fifty years we have become aware that ecological justice – justice *to* the ecological integrity of the living environment, and justice *for* particular peoples' placement in and access to the ecological conditions of their existence – is a constitutive dimension of political society in its widest sense. The political is ecological and ecology has always been interwoven in political society. As we just saw, there is no I, You, or We without attribution, without *Mine, Yours, Ours and Everyone's.* William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, originally published in 1983, demonstrated that the colonizing settlers confronted not "Virgin Land, the Forest Primeval, a wilderness [of forests, lands, lakes, and rivers] which had existed for eons uninfluenced by human hands," but an already highly elaborated anthropogenic landscape.[19] New England was not a "wilderness" but a nature already shaped by the use of controlled burning; practices of seasonal mobility to enable selective hunting and fishing in accordance with seasonal conditions; horticulture; and, for the inhabitants of southern New England, small agricultural fields to grow maize, beans, and squash, oft times using the "three sisters" (an Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) term) method of

companion planting. Indigenous peoples shaped forest density, used fire to clear areas for agriculture, engaged in careful monitoring and controlling of species composition, protected wildlife habitats, and, in order to accomplish these ends, limited fuel accumulation.

What Cronon demonstrates is that the Indigenous peoples and the English settlers operated with competing systems of attribution, competing conceptions of nature, and competing accounts of ecological attention and justice. Property systems are always practices of political ecology, imposing and ordering ecological habitats in accordance with the categorial fit between human social practices – political, legal, and cultural – and the living environment. The settler's ecological relations presupposed private property with exclusive ownership and permanent boundaries, the operation of markets and market incentives toward accumulation, a conception of laboring leading out toward wage labor, and the idea that natural goods, found or cultivated, could become commodities. Conversely, what the settlers saw as people lazily living off the land was actually a finely wrought system of ecological practices that prevented lands being bounded, accepted overlapping claims, operated with what amounted to a system of seasonally adjusted usufruct rights that enabled and respected wildlife migration, operated with a thoroughgoing conception of shared resource uses and communal access, and practiced an ecologically attuned calendar of seasonal mobility. We might say, then, that the Europeans operated with an ecological system of attribution premised on *mine and thine*,[20] while the Indigenous inhabitants of New England *cultivated* a permanence of *everyone's and no one's* that made possible communal, familial and individual acts of use.

Political Anthropology and the End of Pure Biology: Earth System Science

In positing the necessity of political anthropology, Plessner's argument turns on the thesis that the biological border regime of the human requires a non-biological, non-evolutionarily generated system of cultural, social, and political practices: humans can only have a life by leading an historical form of social life in which, once more, each determination has been always already determined. Consider this a naturalization of the Hegelian-idealist conception of the human as a self-determined, rule-following rational animal. Humans accomplish their lives historically. Plessner's construction is *premised* on a categorial divide between nature and culture, between evolutionary production and historical production, between biological reproduction and historical reproduction, biological reproduction as accomplished through, in part, historical reproduction.

The Gaia hypothesis contends that "we may find ourselves and all other living things to be parts and partners of a vast being who in her entirety has the power to maintain our planet as a fit and comfortable habitat for life."[21] While at times Lovelock has tended toward regarding the Earth as a vast organism, his theory only requires a systematic holism in which the whole is more than the concatenation of its separate parts. As we are painfully discovering, "the Earth's atmosphere is actively maintained and regulated by life on the surface, that is, by the biosphere."[22] A signature example are the oceans: "Collectively, the oceans form a reservoir of dissolved gases which helps to regulate the composition of the air we breathe and to provide a stable environment for marine life—about half of all living matter."[23] While one can find anticipations of Gaia theory in earlier thinkers – including in Alexander von Humboldt's

claim that the Earth was not a collection of objects but a dynamic system of relations – no one before Lovelock argued that the Earth was a *self-regulating planetary system*.

The Holocene was a particularly munificent form of Earth system self-regulation that allowed humans to transition from hunting and gathering to an agriculture-based form of life and all the civilizational accomplishments that accompany it and urbanization. By contrast, the Anthropocene marks a condition of the Earth system in which it is no longer fully *self*-regulating apart from human practices, that is, human practices have become a force of nature such that the states of the Earth system, with respect to central elements, have become radically dependent on human actions. Holocene self-regulation has been radically perturbed by deforestation, over-fishing, the production and use of nitrogen fertilizer, dumping forever particles (PFAS) into the oceans, and depositing unspeakable amounts greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The perturbed Holocene will continue its *worsening* state of climate breakdown, the Anthropocene condition, unless collective humanity desists from its ecocidal actions.

This condition of dependence of Earth system states on human actions generates a new scientific and philosophical situation that, when stated precisely, requires us to reconstruct the relation between philosophical anthropology and political anthropology. The natural science that studies the states and operations of the Earth system as a self-regulating whole – Earth system science – must at the same time be directly concerned with human practices and Earth governance. In the Earth sciences of today natural science, social criticism, and political philosophy (political theory) are one. Earth system science must concern itself with an accurate

representation and explanation of the Earth system, which it can only accomplish through the simultaneous consideration of the human actions responsible for the ongoing destabilization and perturbation of the Holocene Earth system. And, hence, it must also concern itself with what must be done as a matter of urgency to protect the remaining ecological integrity of the Holocene nature such that it can sustain a decent form of human living in the midst of living nature. What that notion of "decent" – just and right – comes to in this setting is part of what must be discovered. Earth system science, I want to argue, is and is obligated to invent and discover a new form of human living.

The deep interconnection of objective scientific analysis and explanation, on the one hand, and normative Earth governance, on the other, occurs because the accurate description of the *states of the Earth system*, *the explanation of the coming to be of those states, the predictions concerning what those states may become under different scenarios*, *and what is to be done to prevent the further breakdown are all framed by the baseline and normative authority of the ecological integrity of the Holocene Earth system. These trends can be tracked back to the Holocene's inception until circa 1950 when the Great Acceleration ushered in the Anthropocene condition and the current climate breakdown*.[24] The work of Earth system science depends on the framework of a *normative* Holocene nature. *The judgment* that Holocene normative nature is to be our framework and baseline for the study of the Earth system is a *political judgment*; taking Holocene norms as the constitutive framework for both scientific explanation and political action entails that *these norms have become the material a priori principles of political anthropology*. Once the human becomes a force of nature, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that it is only through a political judgement and a political

decision that the standpoint of Holocene ecological justice is instituted as the necessary condition for Earth science in general. A refusal of Holocene authority would be a refusal of there be any collective responsibility for current and future states of the Earth's ecological integrity in general; the very idea of planetary ecological integrity would collapse. To refuse Holocene normativity is to refuse the very idea of ecological justice. Without ecological justice, however, no people can secure form themselves an egalitarian just form of life internally or in relation to near or distant other peoples.

Until such time that the promises of Holocene ethical life are destroyed, political anthropology must have Holocene ecological justice as its constitutive principle, and it must be practiced through Earth system science and the forms of inquiry and reflection that circulate around it. This thesis can be given a precise content.

The Planetary Commons: Beyond Friend and Enemy

> In addition, a democracy-to-come will rely on a clear-cut distinction between the "universal" and the "in- common." The universal implies inclusion in some already constituted thing or entity, where the in-common presupposes a relation of co- belonging and sharing— the idea of a world that is the only one we have and that, to be sustainable, must be shared by all those with rights to it, all species taken together. For this sharing to become possible and for a planetary democracy to come to pass, the democracy of species, the demand for justice and reparation is inescapable.[25] (Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*)

"The planetary commons: a new paradigm for safeguarding Earth-regulating systems in the Anthropocene" is the most recent attempt by one research group to develop Earth system science into a political anthropology. It does so by explicitly joining the scientific explanation of the broken Holocene Earth system with questions of ethical responsibility and political governance.[26] By "new paradigm," the authors intend *a new representation of the formerly self-regulating mechanisms of the Earth system in relation to a potential formation of planetary governance*. Although lacking the concept, Earth system science takes itself to be a formation of political anthropology. Hence, the "new paradigm" needs to be comprehended categorially, as demanding a transformative philosophical and political anthropology. Three theses are focal in this setting: (1) It is necessary to form a new representation of the perturbed Holocene Earth system in relation to its endangerment; further, (2) the call for a paradigm shift in the conception of planetary governance must be in direct relation to the new representation of the endangered Earth system; and hence (3) a reconstruction of the very idea of the political requires the overcoming of the friend-enemy distinction, either in its acceptance and elaboration by Plessner, or in its original statement in Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*.

(1) A Planetary Commons. The traditional idea of *the global commons* refers to those portions of the Earth system that are outside the boundaries of all sovereign states but on which multiple states are dependent; the relevant portions of the Earth therefore require governance through multilateral treaties and international law to ensure that state interests are protected. These portions of the Earth are: the deep seabed (the geosphere), the high seas (the hydrosphere), Antarctica (the cryosphere), and the atmosphere (the climate system).

Freedom of passage over the high seas makes perspicuous the general logic of the global commons as needful for all, as answerable to perceived self-interests, and therefore as not to be possessed or controlled unilaterally by either particular nations, international corporations, or pirates (who were traditionally referred to as the enemy of all mankind, *hostis humani generis*). Beyond its narrow construction, this interest-based conception of the global commons emphatically presupposes Holocene stability. It presupposes a world in which there is "a continuously stable Earth system, abundant resources to sustain life indefinitely, and predictable and relatively minor environmental disruptions to which humans can easily adapt through incremental governance systems in a just and inclusive way" (PC 2). From ancient Greece to contemporary Western society*, the symbolic representation of nature as "inexhaustibility, endless renewal, and …permanence*"[27] was the taken-for-granted background to all social practices; Holocene resilience was reified into a metaphysical-theological truth, thus becoming the governing human idea of nature.

The metaphysical premise supporting the representation of the global commons is no longer true: "Interlinked planetary boundaries are being transgressed, tipping elements show signs of destabilization, and the resilience of the Earth's biophysical systems is negatively impacted" (PC 2). In short, nature can no longer be perceived within the metaphysical embrace of inexhaustibility, endless renewal, and permanence; because the Holocene Earth system is no longer self-regulating, it is no longer sustaining of the human life under those – geologically naïve but nonetheless historically approximate – characterizations. *The Anthropocene marks the moment of nature becoming historical in a previously unknown way, namely, a trajectory*

that is "characterized by rising risks of triggering irreversible and unmanageable shifts in Earth system functioning" (PC 1).

The novel conceptualization of the Earth in terms of the *planetary commons* is a representation of the previously self-regulating Earth system through the lens of the "Earth's biophysical systems, ranging from critical biomes (e.g., tropical rain forests) to ice sheets, and oceanic and atmospheric circulation [that] are particularly at risk" (PC 3).



Figure 1

This is a map of the Earth in its moment of endangerment; that is, with respect to its climate tipping elements, a map of "Earth system subdomains that determine the state of the climate system" (PC 3; Fig. 1).[28] Plainly, the locations designated on this map are straightforwardly material features of the Earth system, such as glaciers and coral reefs with discrete geographical locations; some of these locations are within states, like the Amazon Rainforest, but many are

not. Nonetheless, these material places are also biophysical systems and "are susceptible to dramatic change if global warming processes crosses threshold values corresponding to their tipping points" (PC 3; Fig.1). That is, the places designated are showing up because they are subject to degradation and destruction through continued human actions that produce global warming. But their destruction cannot be understood in piecemeal fashion, seriatim; each system plays a decisive role in maintaining the ecological integrity and resilience of the Holocene Earth system as a planetary system. Coral reefs, ice sheets, and forests have undergone systematic anthropogenic transformation that, through even a small increase of global mean surface temperature, could lead to *cascading interactions* among them that would radically destabilize the remnants of Holocene normative nature.

(2) The Planetary Commons as Political Concept. As is strikingly evident, nothing about contemporary state-based global governance, with its weak conjunction of the global commons and treaty-based international law amongst fully sovereign states, addresses the actuality of what is occurring. *What is required is a thorough-going synthesis between the representation of the threatened and perturbed Earth system with respect to a novel form of planetary political governance*. The core rationale for a new form of Earth governance derives "from the need to safeguard and steward critical Earth system functions that regulate the stability of the planet and that sustain its resilience, avoid breaching planetary boundaries causing tipping point risks, and work toward ensuring a just and inclusive world for everyone, now and in the future" (PC 5). In one sentence we find integrated an argument about transforming the Earth system, "avoid breaching planetary boundaries" as it is ingredient in achieving a distinctly political end, "ensuring a just and inclusive world for everyone." It is for the sake of this integral purpose

that the proposal arises: drop the idea of the global commons and institute, instead, the novel idea of a *planetary commons*: "The planetary commons are defined by the functions they provide to Earth system stability and resilience [NB: stability and resilience here are referenced to Holocene normative nature] and include all critical Earth-regulating biophysical systems and their functions, irrespective of where they are located, because they are essential to sustain *all life* across the planet" (PC 5; italics JMB); *we can no longer protect human lives, present or future, without protecting all lives in their relation to and dependence on the remnants of Holocene ecological munificence*. Figure 2 is their proposal for the categories of the planetary commons for which the Earth system as a whole provides the frame, with subsystems lying within and across its framing categories; the relevant subsystems are the tipping elements of the system.[29]

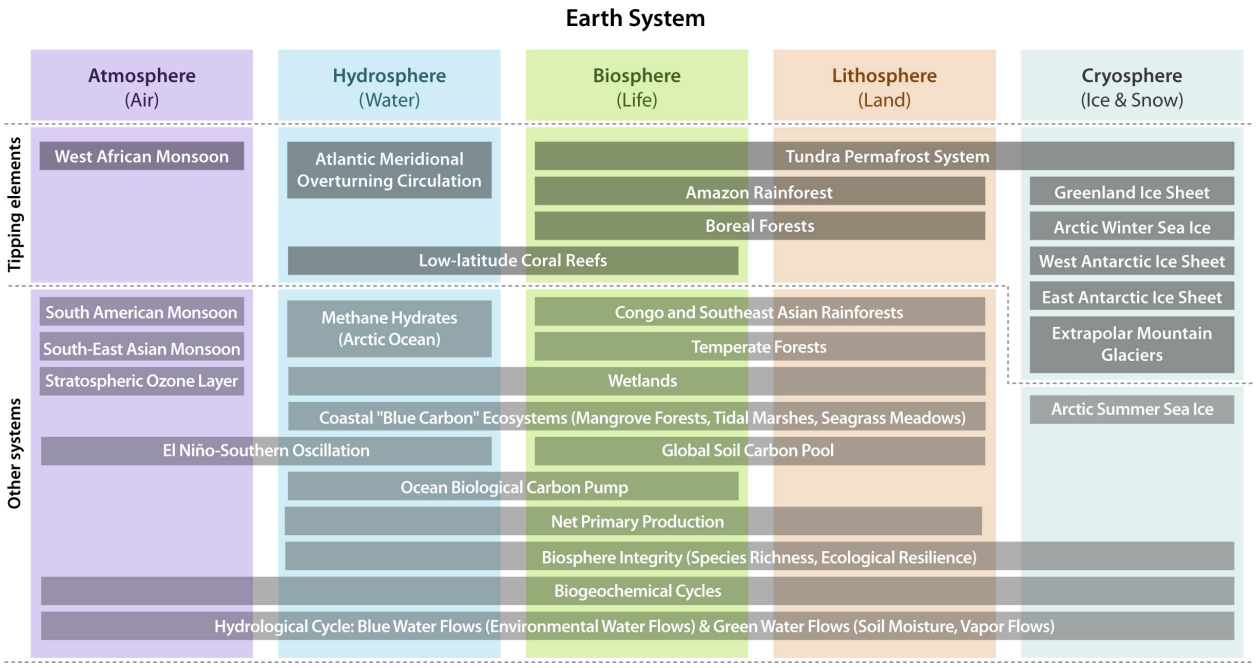


Figure 2

Because the biophysical systems designated as tipping elements are in urgent need of protection, "*full planetary stewardship obligations*" (PC 6; italics JMB) are required. These obligations can succeed only by overcoming the "barriers of state sovereignty and self-determination, [and] vested corporate interests" (PC 6); more precisely, what must be overcome is the "path-dependent political course of action that prioritizes short-term national security and interest over a commonly shared interest in long-term planetary resilience" (PC 6). Planetary politics is at present still attached to the fragmenting old paradigm, with the United States and Russia representing the pursuit of a nearly nihilistic path-dependent politics without any concession to the demands of the planetary commons, even as its degradation and perturbations impact their own citizens.

Planetary commons theory offers, in place of the current political order, a concept of "nested Earth system governance" (PC 6). Governance is "nested" to the extent that it invokes "inclusive systems which aid autonomous functioning of smaller, more exclusive units operating within broadly agreed principles [where] key governance functions […] are organized into multiple, reinforcing, layers of governance" (PC 6).[30] Nested governance is a version of federalism adopted for a planetary scale that includes both formal and informal mechanisms and practices that, in turn, presuppose stronger governing principles, stronger forms of international environmental law than now exist, perhaps legislated by the United Nationals General Assembly as an egalitarian international political forum. What is meant to distinguish the boundaries of nested divisions as opposed to standard political regions is that they are related to regions of planetary endangerment: the Amazon rainforest, but also, in light of this past summer's devastating heatwaves, the strengthening of existing environmental bodies like

the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine in which nine states and regions in the Rhine watershed cooperate over the river's use and protection.

The idea of nested governance sufficient to provide caretaking oversight of threatened subsystems can sound hopelessly naïve and idealist, a sheer wishful thinking because it demands much without consideration of possibility. However, in a brief flash, toward the end of the article, the argument turns constitutional and philosophical, proposing "new principles that align with novel Anthropocene dynamics and that could reverse the path-dependent course of current governance." The authors continue,

> These new principles are captured under a new legal paradigm designed for the Anthropocene called earth system law and include, among others, the principles of differentiated degrowth and sufficiency, the principle of interconnectivity, and a new planetary ethic (e.g., principle of ecological sustainability). (PC 8)[31]

These principles are incommensurable with existing liberal ethical and legal principles; they are incompatible with the prevailing worldview(s) of the citizens of the North Atlantic civilization. In short, the material a priori principles of interconnectivity and ecological sustainability require a reconstitution of the political and political anthropology that overcomes Plessner's and Schmitt friend-enemy theory. *These principles seek to reconstitute the world from the perspective of (Earth system/Gaia) interconnectivity and ecological sustainability, that is, from the perspective of a radically novel reconstruction of ecological justice as the moral metaphysics governing the Anthropocene, as hence foundational meta-principles from which the principles of sufficiency and degrowth would follow*.

The principle of interconnectivity should be regarded a meta-principle for environmental ethics because it provides the ethical framing and making explicit of the planetary commons as the specification of the political judgment making Holocene nature the normative boundary condition for the intelligibility of civilizational humanity. Its plain intent is argue for the necessity of connecting ontology, ethics, and Earth governance in the light of the *endangerment* to the ethical couplet of Holocene nature and Holocene human civilization caused by fossil fuel capitalism in its developing historical manifestations. Interconnectivity understood in this manner is sufficient to justify a *jus cogens* international law prohibiting ecocide or requiring the effective implementation of ecological sustainability.[32]

In this setting, even the statement of the requirement for an ethical principle of sufficiency and an economics of degrowth are meant to underline that neither legal regulation on its own nor the implementation of sustainable ecological practices can occur without a radical transformation in both the conception of human flourishing or the organization of the economy. A principle of sufficiency intends a modern version of the Aristotelian mean between the goods necessary to meet basic needs and extravagant wastefulness, but now under the modern moral requirement of human equality. Hence, we cannot hold to even a minimum conception of moral universalism without enabling all Earth citizens to have the full repertoire of the material and institutional conditions for full and active participation in the life of their society. The bluntest statement of this requirement is that all humans are entitled to the full repertoire of legal, political, and social rights as set out in the two 1966 human rights covenants: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Contra the growth imperative of classical free market

economics, especially as pursued under contemporary late neoliberalism, degrowth makes the principle environmental sustainability an absolute ceiling on the limits the growth. The underlying thesis here is that rather than positing an alternative economic system to that of capitalism, we collectively create that alternative – which will undoubtedly contain a role for market practices – through setting in place a revised conception of human well-being that is constituted by a human rights ethical minimum and a novel conception of the ethical maximum, on the one hand, and a corresponding degrowth economics governed by principles of ecological sustainability sufficient for transgenerational ecological justice.[33]

(3) Redefining the Political: Beyond Friend and Enemy. The idea of the planetary commons thus requires going beyond the friend and enemy model of state relations developed by Schmitt and adapted by Plessner. However, rather than attempting to directly dismantle the connection between the political and the friend-enemy distinction, my procedure here will be to first *qualify* it and then demonstrate how the qualification enables a systematic overcoming.

We already glimpsed the requisite qualification in our opening account of Plessner's political anthropology. Two of Plessner's claims about the political are conceptually compatible but importantly distinct. "The human", Plessner states, is "responsible for the world in which it lives…The human is to be conceived of as subject of attribution of its culture, as creator within the horizon of its history" (PA, 14,19). Human beings are niche constructing engineers, beings who non-naturally make the world they inhabit. The original *power* of the human is its creative worldmaking capacity. But this worldmaking and niche constructing occurs precisely in light of the necessity of having a life solely and only through leading a life; worldmaking is the cooperative activity of a We, of extended families, clans, tribes, villages, seasonal

confederations, cities, and nations. And while such groups may indeed find other groups foreign and a threat, what they are a threat *to* is the original *this* worldmaking We, the We each I is aware of as belonging to as a condition of its living. The We is, for each We, a transcendental We, not because in the first instance it opposes any other We, but because it is worldmaking and hence infinitely responsible for its world. Each form of life must solve the simultaneous equation of social reproduction and social cooperation in a manner, Plessner argues, that is *taken to be unconditionally just*, and so each form of life is implicitly, if not explicitly, political. In the first instance, human life is political because it is a worldbuilding, worldmaking collective enterprise that must extend itself across generations. It is this formation of We that *can* find another We foreign, an existential threat, an enemy. It is not the existential threat of another We, however, that *makes* an original We political; it is only because this We is the (constitutional) transcendental condition for the possibility of a just and right world that it can undergo an existential threat at all. In other words, the (constitutional) We was already political before the They entered the scene. In an ecologically compressed world, *They* are ever-present, impossible to ignore, which is what makes immigration and state conflicts central to path dependent political argument. But that does not alter the primary vertical structure – every I as part of a We – organizing each form of life.

Schmitt rightly saw that liberal individualism in the context of a market exchange economy, which is portrayed and theorized as a non-political form of social cooperation and social coordination by liberal theory, made individual self-interest and individual lives ontologically and morally prior to political community. Within the shadow of moral and economic liberalism, the political becomes a secondary means, a *modus vivendi*, an instrument

to aid in the satisfaction of self-interest; hence, the disappearance of the transcendental We in some political locales or the reemergence of the nationalist We to compensate for the previous absence. With the political so instrumentalized, Schmitt's critique seems to gain traction: only an existential threat, a war or civil breakdown, can offer the necessary reminder that without friends, without political community there would be no We and no world. But that does not make the friend-enemy a necessary condition of the political; that would only be true if liberalism was true.

Although deserving analysis on its own, Plessner's constitutional-creation conception of society as always already political theoretically resonates with with David Graeber and David Wengrow's archeology based *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*,[34] with its contentions that the historical record demonstrates that no human society is pre-political, that what makes a society political is its implicit or explicit deliberation on how to organize a life together, that the forms of political living are each experimental creations, and the historical record supports the claim that the possible forms of political life are richly plural. Graeber and Wengrow's analysis ranges widely but does lean heavily on the record of the Indigenous peoples of America. Politics, they argue, is always, *sotto voce*, about collective self-government that can take radically egalitarian and hierarchical forms, radically democratic and anti-democratic forms; the size, political character, and external relations among groups are forever shifting; confederations and alliances alternate with conflicts. A political form of life is always an historical experiment that is subject to revision, reformation, revolution, and collapse. Once one is a member of a political We in which each is aware of themself as a member of a We that commands authority over them, then one may find oneself forced to defend it against what is

foreign. Placing the emphasis on the self-creation of a form life makes the friend-enemy distinction, logically, *a corollary, a direct implication* of their being political forms of being alive.

A terrible feature of the present historical moment is its ongoing revocation of the post-World War II system of alliances and federation; increasingly many peoples across the globe accept and orient themselves through the defining Schmittean political theorem: our form of life must sustain itself against the antagonistic forms of life that surround us. But this Schmittean propulsion of political life is not only not necessary, it is also now a lapsed luxury of the Holocene that is no longer rationally intelligible nor morally acceptable. If there is an overriding political *existential* necessity, then it is the synthetic coupling of the material planetary commons to the political planetary commons, the overriding ecological necessity of nested planetary governance. Unless China, the United States, India, Russia – the four largest emitters of greenhouse gases – *collectively undertake* to achieve net zero greenhouse emissions in a foreseeable future, unless they agree to surrender and surrender soon their coal, oil, and gas production, then the youth of today and tomorrow will not have a future with a quality of life that is even remotely comparable to that enjoyed today. And those living in low-income states will become increasingly vulnerable to life-threatening climate conditions (heat and drought) and weather events (flood, fire, monsoon).

Under the title of planetary commons, cosmopolitanism shifts from a political ideal of peace among peoples, which nonetheless remains as politically necessary as ever, to an urgent practice of political cooperation that can secure what remains of ecological justice, multispecies justice, and justice to future generations, where these formations of justice can be recognized as

the necessary conditions for social cooperation in general. This statement provides the necessary conditions for political anthropology in the Anthropocene.

Conclusion: Homo Absconditus

> "…the man who knows the limits of his boundlessness yet grasps himself as unfathomable. Open to himself and the world, he recognizes his own concealment." (Helmuth Plessner, "*Die Homine Abscondito*")[35]

Let me construct my conclusion from four particularly compulsive sentences of Plessner's. First sentence: "No age can at any moment remain oblivious of the fact it is confronted with tasks that precisely its generations, the old, the mature, the young, must solve" (PA 31). No age, Plessner is contending, can remain oblivious to its being a moment of transition between a passing age and an age to come, that we are always in the midst of a history for which we must take responsibility through determining what is to be done in order to "cope with the demands of life" in accordance with objective criteria. We keep discovering that what we thought were the means of life have become obsolescent, and hence the possibility of leading a life must be redetermined anew. The great block to the experience of generational historical obligation for problem solving and renewal is path dependency.

Second sentence: "One day the current state's depravation to a mere provisional arrangement reveals itself to be a betrayal, a betrayal of the meaning of the life of the generation tied to this present" (PA 32). The Anthropocene must be recognized as a terrible awakening, the revelation that fossil fuel capitalism with all the social arrangements that secured it and made it possible, has become a betrayal of the meaning of life we find ourselves in the midst of. As Katherina Block has argued, one day we shall come to recognize the Anthropocene displacement and decentering of the human (anthropocentric humanism) from the center to being a mere part of the living world as a fourth historical blow to human self-love and narcissism following the three Freud noted: the cosmological blow, *Die kosmologische Kränkung*, following the discovery that Earth is not the center of the universe; the biological blow, *Die biologische Kränkung*, following Darwin's discovery that humans are descended from the apes, and the psychological blow, *Die psychologische Kränkung*, following Freud's discovery

that the conscious ego is not even master of its own house.[36] NB, these are insults or injuries to or humiliations of self-love and narcissism, that is, humiliations of an overblown and unjustified bloating of the human. In this respect, the fourth, Anthropocene insult, the submerging or relocating of human history within the history of the planet, the acknowledging of the human species as one species within a profound ecological abundance of mutually dependent species, the recognition of the human as but a potentially disposable part of a relational whole, has struggled for acceptance since, once more, the striking down is of a self-destructive hybris, a humbling of the technological arrogance that, even today, perceives in the arrival of AI potential salvation. One might argue that the current brutalizing betrayal of the meaning of the human will continue unless and until either our narcissism and Promethean arrogance suffer a profound humiliation, the disaster scenario, or one finds oneself turned toward the Earth as toward a home long lost, the recognition scenario.

Sentences three and four: "Only if and because we do not know what else the human is still capable of does it make sense to persevere through a life of suffering on this Earth. The human's own unfathomability is the binding principle of human life and of human comprehension of life, binding for the sake of the *seriousness* of its task (PA 26). Unfathomability for Plessner is an existential concept: because our past does not determine our present and future, because the future is dependent on us in significant but also as yet unknown ways, dependent on what we find must say and on what we can and must do, then the meaning of life will remain up to us. If the present *is a betrayal* of the meaning of life bequeathed us, say a slaughtering and wasting of human lives because of the sheer vanity of political leaders, a ruination of precious lives because oil oligarchs want more wealth, the letting die of innocent children because yachts and diamonds are valued more highly than food and vaccines, then only unfathomability enables the seriousness of this present to emerge because only the unfathomability of the human licenses and justifies the undertaking of a future that is yet to be decided, that necessarily will remain undecided until there are no decision-makers left. The planetary commons gestures toward a grieving justice bent on repair and restoration, on restitution and redress, on reconciling human life with non-human life in a

condition in which unspeakable and immeasurable amounts of non-human life has already been extinguished, millions of species of life made extinct.

I take it that anything other than the radical pursuit of grieving restorative justice would be another betrayal of life, human and non-human.

J.M. Bernstein

New School for Social Research

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[1] By Mark Landler and Chico Harlan, "Europe's Summer of Reckoning is 'Just the Beginning'," *The New York Times*, July 29,2026; https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/29/world/europe/summer-heat-wave-fires-climate-change.html.

[2] (Oxford University Press, 2000), viii.

[3] Angelique Chrisafis in Bordeaux, Angela Giuffrida in Rome and Jennifer Rankin in Brussels, "France and Spain race to contain huge wildfires before fresh heatwave begins," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2025; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jul/27/france-and-spain-race-to-contain-huge-wildfires-before-fresh-heatwave-begins.

[4] https://currentwildfires.com/en/wildfires-spain/; download August 27, 2026.

[5] World Meteorological Association, "Western Europe has hottest June on record," July 9, 2026; https://wmo.int/media/news/western-europe-has-hottest-june-record.

[6] "Copernicus: Highest July global ocean surface temperatures as exceptionally hot, dry conditions fuel wildfires in Europe," August 10, 2026; https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-highest-july-global-ocean-surface-temperatures-exceptionally-hot-dry-conditions-fuel.

[7] Ben Coates, "Europe's Great Rivers are Dying. The Continent is in for a Shock," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2026.

[8] Government of Canada, "Canadian Wildland Fire Information System," https://cwfis.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/en ; August 27, 2026; https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/15/opinion/europe-rivers-danube-rhine-drought.html.

[9] Natasha May and Jonathan Watts, "'We have lost everything': extreme rainfall across Asia brings flash floods and typhoons," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2026; https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/jul/28/extreme-rainfall-asia-flash-floods-typhoons-climate-change.

[10] Grahame Madge, "An 'unprecedented' El Niño and its implications for the weather forecaste," *Met Office*, August 21, 2026; https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/blog/2026/an-unprecedented-el-nio-and-its-implications-for-the-weather-forecast.

[11] For a survey of competing philosophical accounts of the Anthropocene that concludes with a defense of the relevance of Plessner's philosophical anthropology, see Katherina Block, "Humandezentrierung im Anthropozän" ["Human Decentering in the Anthropocene"], forthcoming in *Der Anthropos im Anthropozän. Die Wiederkehr des Menschen im Moment seiner vermeintlich endgültigen Verabschiedung* [*The Anthropos in the Anthropocene: The Return of the Human at the Moment of Its Supposedly Final Farewell*], Hannes Bahjor (ed.) (De Gruyter, 2026). It is worth underlining that none of the current philosophies that attempt to engage with the Anthropocene condition are promising.

[12] Hans-Peter Krüger, "Umwelten und Welten im Anthropozän: Zum Verhältnis zwischen Ökologie und Philosophischer Anthropologie" *Internationales Jahrbuch für philosophische Anthropologie* 10/1 (December 2021), 300 (translation JMB).
[13] This is a premise of evolutionary theory: organisms mutate, and particular mutations can be beneficial by providing forms that are a fit for an environment. Ecology concerns the patterning of organisms interaction. The primary unit of ecology is not the organism but an ecosystem, integrated biotic communities in relation to their physical environment. Plessner's procedure focuses on types of individual organisms with the primary purpose of making explicit what having a boundary regime involves, how the structure of dependence and independence is achieved through achieving a boundary. See, Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Millay Hyatt (Fordham University Press, 2019). In my Introduction to the volume, xxxvii-lxv, I place Plessner's theory in the context of contemporary philosophy of biology.
[14] Rachel Carson, *The Silent Spring* (Mariner Books, 2002 (19620), 297.
[15] Helmuth Plessner, *Political Anthropology*, trans. Nils F. Schott (Northwestern University Press, 2018 (1931)), 59. The original title of this book *Macht und menschliche Natur: Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichichen Weltensicht* [*Power and Human Nature: An Introduction to the Anthropology of the Historical Worldview*]. The translation includes an excellent Introduction by Heike Delitz and Robert Seyfert, and incisive epilogue by Joachim Fischer. Future references to this work will be given in the body of the text as PA, followed by page number to this edition.
[16] This was the standard practice in Weimar in the writings of Georg Jellinek, Hermann Heller, Hans Kelsen, Max Weber, alongside Carl Schmitt.
[17] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Expanded Edition, trans. George Schwab (The University of Chicago Press, 2007 (1932)); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: Student of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959 (1958)).
[18] For a compelling refinement of this thesis see Joseph Rouse, *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).
[19] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, 2003 (1983), 12. Cronon does not use the phrase "anthropogenic landscape"; rather, he states that "the Indians had lived on the continent for thousands of years, and had to a significant extent modified its environment to their purposes." Cronon's analysis was deepened first by Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
[20] Carolyn Merchant's *Ecological Revolutions* is, in effect, a deep historical exemplification of theory of modernity she developed in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (Harper and Row, 1980).
[21] Lovelock, *Gaia*, 1.
[22] Lovelock, *Gaia*, 9.
[23] Lovelock, *Gaia*, 78.
[24] For the standard introduction to Earth System Science as a scientific practice see Tim Lenton, *Earth System Science*: *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
[25] Translated: Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019), 40.
[26] Johan Rockström, Louis Kotzé, Svetlana Milutinović, et. al., "The planetary commons: A new paradigm for safeguarding Earth-regulating systems in the Anthropocene," *PNAS* 121/5 (2024), 1-10; https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2301531121. Further references to this article will be in the text, abbreviated PC followed by the page number.
[27] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 12.
[28] The map is adapted from David Armstrong Mckay, et. al. "Exceeding 1.5°C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points," *Science* 377 (2022); https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/science.abn7950.
[29] Figure 2 was originally published in Armstrong Mckay, et. al., "Exceeding 1.5°C global warming."
[30] Quoting Prakash Kashwan and Robert Holahan, "Nested governance for effective REDD+: Institutional and political arguments," *International Journal of the Commons* 8/2 (2014), 560; https://thecommonsjournal.org/articles/10.18352/ijc.450.
[31] See Rakhyun E. Kim and Louis J. Kotzé, "Planetary boundaries at the intersection of Earth system law, science and governance: A state-of-the-art review," *Reciel* 30/3 (2021), 3-15; https://doi.org/10.1111/reel.12383.

[32] For one possible construction of this framework see my *Earth Citizens: An Emergency Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (forthcoming).
[33] For my version of what is required here see footnote 32. For a now a widely accepted economics statement of these requirements see, for the beginning of the conversation, Herman E. Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (Beacon Press, 1996); and for a recent statement, Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economics* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017).
[34] (Allen Lane, 2021).
[35] In *Social Research* 36/4 (1969), 501.
[36] Katherina Block, "Humandezentrierung im Anthropozän," to appear in *Der Anthropos im Anthropozän. Die Wiederkehr des Menschen im Moment seiner vermeintlich endgültigen Verabschiedung*, edited by Hannes Bahjor (De Gruyter, 2026).