

Oceanic and Tethysian being-in-the-world

An essay on the human self and world understanding in the Anthropocene

Michael Paulsen

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Abstract. *This essay proposes that we, as human beings, especially in the West and in the Holocene epoch, have developed a life-negating understanding of ourselves and the world. This is uncovered in the Anthropocene, through what is called 'the Anthropocene crack': a painful eco-wound revealing how we forgot that we are living beings in a living water-world, coexisting with other living water-beings. Yet the Anthropocene crack is also a gateway to a new Anthropocene world understanding that acknowledges our oceanic and tethysian being-in-the world, which is an ecological understanding of life,*

living beings and the world in which water is seen as the arche (ἀρχή) of everything in this world.

1. Introduction

This philosophical, free-floating essay aims to dive into a stream of thought that begins to catch the essence of our relationship with water—or what I’m going to term “our oceanic and tethysian being-in-the-world”—of which an understanding is arriving today, in the Anthropocene¹, as wanting to be thought (instead of remaining in its hiding), saying not just something about “humans” and “water” but about human *being-in-the-world*, in the Heideggerian sense.²

Whether such an attempt can succeed depends on whether we can think of man’s being-in-the-world in terms of water and about what is revealed and hidden in the Late Holocene³ regarding man’s specific being-in-the-world-with-water as it comes to the fore today, in what I later in this essay call “the Anthropocene crack.”⁴ In short, the attempt is to dive into a thought stream that can disclose how man’s being-in-the-world is an *aquatic*⁵ being-in-the-world (and what the implication of this might be). As a foreshadowing of what follows, this will eventually point us in the direction of what may rescue us from the ecological crisis we have brought ourselves and all life into, by misunderstanding water, our own being and the world in which we live—and through this overlooked that the Anthropocene environmental problems essentially are linked to our lack of

¹ There are many good critical introductions to the term, concept, and idea that we today live in an *Anthropocene age*. See Paulsen et al. (2022). The aim with this essay is not to discuss the term.

² The inspiration for the essay is the late Heidegger and young Coccia. The main thesis of the essay is, to some degree, a combination of these two. The primary works are Heidegger (1977) and Coccia (2019).

³ The term *late Holocene* signifies the part of the Holocene, starting with the development of writing, in relation to the great river cultures that arose in ancient times. See Paulsen (2021) for further details and arguments.

⁴ This essay focus on what is forgotten in Western thinking and tries to develop some new thoughts here. Other routes that focus on non-Western thinking and First Nation perspectives, cosmologies and ontologies would also be valid and perhaps even more obvious and fruitful rivers to follow.

⁵ The Latin term *aquatic* is used to signify general or Late Holocene emphasis on water. *Hydrological* signifies a more technical term, linked to the hydrosphere and comes from the Greek; *oceanic* and *tethysian* are used to signify our relation to water, as revealed in the Anthropocene crack or other functional equivalences.

understanding our own and life's aquatic being-in-the-world—what also could be called our life-negating *life forgetfulness*.⁶

2. A first characterization of our current understanding of and relation to water

If one Googles “water,” the first answer that comes up is Wikipedia⁷ saying that water “is an inorganic, transparent, tasteless, odorless, and nearly colorless chemical substance [H₂O], which is the main constituent of Earth’s hydrosphere and the fluids of all known living organisms.” (“Water,” 2022)

This definition both reveals and hides the essential features of our current understanding of water.⁸ First, it demonstrates that we think of water today as something abstract that can be defined and described, as if it was a universal that can be found out in the empirical world, in instances of other abstract things, for example, “the hydrosphere” and “living organisms.” What is hidden is its historical specificity. It presents itself as universally valid, not as specific to a Late Holocene understanding. I am not saying that this understanding is just a mere human construct or that it is wrong. What I mean is only that the abstract conception of water presupposes and is part of a historically specific disclosure that reveals something true about water but also hides its own limitations. Yet before we can dive deeper into this, let me bring forth the second way water presents itself to us today.

If we ask ourselves, at least as Westernized global citizens, how water presents itself in our daily lives, the answer is straightforward: we *use* water in many of our activities, without thinking much about it. I use water when I take a shower, make a cup of coffee, water my plants, wash my floor, make soup, clean my bike, and, more indirectly, when I use electricity from the hydroelectric plant or consume things produced and transported using water or eat grain from drained and sprayed fields. Yet all this conceals my essential relation to water. Why? Because it turns water into something contingent and abstract: a “transparent, tasteless, odorless, and nearly colorless chemical substance”—something I approach as an

⁶ The concept of *Life-forgetfulness*, or what I also call *earth forgetfulness* or *water-world forgetfulness*, is explained in Nørreklit and Paulsen (2022) and Paulsen (2022), including its roots, going back to Heidegger.

⁷ I here only use Wikipedia as an *empirical* indicator of our common understanding of water today.

⁸ The concept of *understanding* is used in the broad radical hermeneutical sense (Caputo, 2018), implying that it signifies how we interpret our self and the world, explicit and implicit, including our whole interpretative framework and horizon of meaning, imbedded in everything we think, do, sense, dream, feel, and speak.

abstract thing that I do not know—in its totality—where it comes from; and even more important, what matters is only *what it does*, as a substance, *when needed*. If it can be *substituted* with other things doing the work, then it is not a problem; what counts is only the result. This understanding turns water into something replaceable and calculatable that can be drawn out of being, controlled, utilized, and directed here and there. In short, the Late Holocene everyday understanding of water as a forced standing reserve we can use coincides with the Late Holocene understanding of water as an abstract substance. This unique historical coincidence and revealing is central to our current understanding of water, our connection with water, and the environmental crisis we have put ourselves and other living beings in.

It might be true that the technical-scientific understanding of water is historically specific, but *to use water* is not specific to any period. The lion drinks water, and so does prehistoric man. However, the specific abstract way of using water, as something we forcefully extract as a pure resource, transforming it into different things, leading it, steering it, controlling it, as an abstract substance; this is a historically specific understanding of water. Nevertheless, this does not mean that this understanding is incorrect. It reveals some truth about us and water.

This truth was not revealed to the pre-Holocene man. Before the Holocene, man *did* use water, like lions and other living beings, but water was a gift that humans praised and lived together with. Water was not an abstract substance, neither was it a product of human engineering; it was not “redirected by humans”—through “construction of irrigation, ditches, canals, dams, reservoirs, the diversion of rivers and streams, the digging of wells, to extract groundwater, and other water control systems designed to support agriculture production and human settlements” (Ellis, 2018. P. 58). Yet it is important to notice a further difference, which appeared in the Late Holocene, made explicit, for instance, in Pamuk’s novel *The Red-Haired-Woman*. In this, we witness the shift from the old well-diggers of the beginning of the twentieth century, who relied on idiosyncratic water sensitivity and knowledge of where and how to dig for groundwater, to the total replacement in the end of twentieth century by technological tools that made this superfluous. Both the “old” and the “new” well-diggers “redirect water”; but the latter forced it out of being, without any personal water sensitivity or effort to listening to or caring for the earth-water-place. The old diggers looked for special places to dig, got into a relationship with the digging place and with the people living in the area, as well as those who were apprenticed to the well-diggers. The machine diggers did not need this. Because they could dig fast and deep with their machines, they did not need to sustain their personal knowledge of well

digging. For them, one place was no different from another; what they met was only challenges in the soil layers that had to be overcome so that water could be forced up and out for use. The same could be said about the differences between old and new industrialized agriculture, old mountain paths and contemporary tunnels, and other similar shifts in how we relate to water and the earth. Thus, the Late Holocene understanding shifts from a redirection of water and use of water based on personal water knowledge, care, and sensitivity to where it is, where it comes from and how it circulates, to forcing water out of being, as an abstract universal substance that can be steered and controlled. By the same token, we paradoxically become water ignorant the more we seem to master water.

Philosophically, *the shift* started in the West, with Thales or, more precisely, Aristotle. Since Aristotle, every book on Western philosophy has stated that Thales was the first philosopher and that Thales thought that *water* (*hudōr* in Greek) is the grounding substance, origin, or principle (*arche* (ἀρχή)) in Greek) of everything.⁹ Yet what Thales meant is not clear. The best evidence is the words of Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*.¹⁰ Yet Aristotle uses his own terms to articulate what Thales might have thought. Nevertheless, some hints are hidden in Aristotle's sayings. According to Aristotle, Thales is the first philosopher because he is the first to think about the *arche* of *everything*. For Aristotle, Thales thought that the world *consists* of a material *substance, water*, that everything is composed of and eventually will dissolve into, explaining that all changes are fluctuations of one and the same matter. From this, according to Aristotle, developed an elaborated thinking of what everything consists of, up till Aristotle's own theory of matter and, we could add, leading further to today's understanding of everything as composed of abstract substances. So water (and *eo ipso* the world), understood as an abstract substance, goes all the way down to the birth of Western thinking. Yet more important things are hidden. For the Greek, *arche* could also mean "that from which something springs": the *arche* of a child is, for instance, its mother and father. Also, *arche* could mean the central basis of a thing, for example, the ship's keel is the ship's *arche*.¹¹ If we pay heed to this, Thales might have seen water as the progenitor of everything or as the central basis of the world we live in (Hawke, 2018). Furthermore, it is telling that Aristotle is *puzzled* about what Thales meant. Thus, Aristotle affirms:

⁹ I draw in the following on Pinto (2016).

¹⁰ The two famous places where Aristotle talks about Thales is his *Metaphysics*, Arist. Met. 983 b and his book on the soul, *De Anima*, Arist. De an. 405 + 4011 a.

¹¹ *Arche* is a notoriously difficult Greek concept. The meanings of the concept I present in this essay are not novel. See Mansfeld (1985) for an overview, and Hawke (2018) who takes it up as the primordial being at the dawn of Time.

[Thales got] the notion [about water as the arche of everything] perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it [...] and from the fact that the seeds of all things have a moist nature, and that water is the origin of the nature of moist things. Some think that even the ancients who lived long before the present generation, and first framed accounts of the gods, had a similar view of nature; for they made Ocean and Tethys the parents of creation (Ross, 2009). (DK A 12; Arist. Met. 983 b)

The last sentence refers to the myth about Oceanus and Tethys, two titans who were brother and sister and married to each other; in the Iliad, they were said to be the primeval father and mother of all gods and the genesis of all—thus being the begetters and authors of creation (γένεσις) (Pinto, 2016, p. 255). Oceanus is a river that *surrounded the world* and the origin of all rivers and springs, while Tethys is perhaps identical to Tiamat, the Mesopotamian primordial goddess of the sea, the symbol of chaos (Χάος) and primordial creation, which *forms all things* or the body parts of which constitute *the earth and heaven*. Which of these layers was still alive when Thales lived is hard to say. Yet it is certain that both Oceanus and Tethys refer to mythologies about the creation of the world out of water: Oceanus as the surrounding river and Tethys as parts of the world, along with their copulation - the interplay between the living world and its living beings - as creating a chaosmos¹². What is striking is that Aristotle is aware that Thales is inspired by such older mythology¹³, in which everything is ultimately aquatic or, more precisely, an *oceanic* and *tethysian* in combination (Pinto, 2016). Furthermore, in *De Anima*, Aristotle says that Thales thinks everything is full of gods.¹⁴ This indicates animism, hylozoism, or even pantheism; or maybe that Thales has an idea of water as fundamental to the world which is somehow—by the same token—divine. If water is an ancestral arche of the living world and, thus, the generic origin of all living (i.e., existing, (self)moving) things, it could also be regarded as divine, not least if we keep in mind the mythological background.¹⁵ Here, the world of living beings *owes* its existence to water and is full of divinity (“aliveness”, self-movement) because of that. They are oceanic and tethysian in nature.

¹² *Chaosmos* is a term coined by Joyce and frequently taken up by Deleuze (1993, p. 81).

¹³ Leading back to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian river-cultures.

¹⁴ De an. i 5.411a7-8 = DK A22.

¹⁵ That “everything is full of gods” is congruent with “everything (in sum) has water as its arche,” which is also the conclusion reached by Pinto, who says, “If water for Thales is just an ancestral, generative principle of which all things originally came, water would be the creator of all things and so could easily be regarded as divine” (2016, p. 253).

So, at the dawn of Western thinking, we do not only find the roots of an abstract view of everything, hence detachment, but we also find an oceanic and tethysian understanding of the world as a sacred living place, of which *water* is the generic and ancestral life-principle—*arche*—which is only partly covered up by Aristotle. This hidden understanding of water is somehow still alive in contemporary stories and songs.¹⁶

To sum up the first characterization of our current mainstream understanding of water, embedded in the way we in our Westernized society and culture treat and live with water is that we understand water as something abstract, that we use for many things, not knowing exactly, in our daily lives, from where it comes or where it goes or what happens with it. As a shadowy complement to this, we also understand water as a life-significant place. Both understandings work in the background of our lives, yet if we pay attention to them, they reveal aspects of our self and the world. As implied in the Google definition, we, as living beings, *consist* of water; likewise, the living world, here understood hydrospherically, consists of water and, ultimately, we living beings can only live within this water-world.

Yet the essential features remain in the dark: our oceanic and tethysian being-in-the-world is unclear. Even if one grants that the mainstream Late Holocene understanding of water is as suggested, one might object that this concerns not specifically water but rather our whole relationship to the earth: mountains, woods, landscapes, and ourselves understood as bodies, as abstract calculable and replaceable units and, as socialized and culturalized beings, something we can attend to now and then. True but not the whole truth. To dive deeper and see more, we must pay attention to the specificities of our current relationship with water and water itself as it calls out to us today. This calling can be heard if we move from where we have been in this essay until now, namely in the Late Holocene, before the problems of the Late Holocene understanding of ourselves, our water-being, and the water-world seriously began to crack. This crack in the Anthropocene reveals the essence of the Late Holocene world understanding, thereby setting us free if we pay attention to the revealment, making it possible to limit the later Holocene understanding and make ourselves ready to receive a new world understanding. This might sound mystical and cloudy. Yet behind clouds, a kind of clearness might be (or as we are going to dive more deeply into, clouds are better than their reputation). What matters is to open ourselves to what emerges, however murky it might be, if we focus on oceanic and tethysian

¹⁶ Such as Springsteen's "The River" or Enos "By this river", or Le Guin's "The Earthsea" cycle, to name a few.

being-in-the-world and let water have a voice about: 1) “the Anthropocene crack”; 2) how this opens to seeing the Late Holocene understanding of water in its limitations; and 3) how this points toward a new Anthropocene understanding of ourselves as essentially an oceanic-tethysian being-in-the-world; and which also includes 4) a new understanding of water and *eo ipso* the world *as* water, which deviates from but also makes the Late Holocene understanding of water (as abstract and exceptional places) *(im)possible*¹⁷. A first sketch of this follows in the next two sections, seeking to dive again into the same spot, to finally becoming a part of this place of truth and thereby bringing from it as a new home and dwelling place, where we intrinsically belong and can see ourselves truly as water-beings in a world that inevitable surrounds us. Or as I will hint at in the end, the essence of water is “environment” or “surrounding” or “milieu”. However, to understand or even to reject this, we must go through the outlined steps, leading us down to and into the tethysian ocean, where we have always been, like a move from Middle-Earth to Earthsea.

3. The Anthropocene crack and limitations of the Late Holocene understanding of water

The Anthropocene can be seen as an epoch in which we begin to - and are asked to - reconsider our understanding of ourselves and the world. Understood in this way, as an epistemological term, rather than only a name for a specific part of earth history (Paulsen 2019), we are pushed to a reevaluation of how we have looked at our past, present, and future. Yet how so? The link between human activities and current ecological global catastrophes (global warming, unstable climate etc.) *indicates* that there is something wrong with the Late Holocene way of understanding and being present in the world; this being-in-the-world seems to be life-negating, limited, and flawed (Nørreklit and Paulsen, 2022).

Understood in this way, the Anthropocene can be seen as a crack, not only ontologically and epistemologically but also, axiologically, and existentially. We live in a wounded time, we are this wound, we feel we are responsible for the wound, we are hurt by it, we are thinking and beginning to respond from this woundedness, and, in solidarity with others, we are wounded by effects and domino-effects of our Late Holocene abstract self and world understanding. Understood in this way, the Anthropocene says, “We did it, we are sorry, we are hurt, we hurt

¹⁷ The Derridean concept *(im)possible* means that an undeconstructable condition of something constructed makes the latter possible as constructed, but also not possible, in the sense that it can be deconstructed (Caputo, 2018).

others, we are lost, we realized what we have done, we want to start all over.” That is it.

Yet what matters is to see how the Anthropocene crack reveals 1) the life-negating water-world-forgetfulness of our Late Holocene understanding of our self and the world, but also 2) what has been forgotten: a different understanding of water. Thus, the crack is an oceanic and tethysian event: our tears, our declining fertility, the melting poles, the rising sea levels, global warming, and other calamities, these wounds, are related to our misunderstanding of water. Of course, we have also misunderstood other things, but our misconception of water is a misunderstanding of the *arche* of all living things and the living world, including ourselves. From the crack we begin to sense how we forgot the most important aspect: that we are living beings in a living world, where all life is comprised, bound together, and surrounded by water. It is not that we have totally forgotten this. All the way up until now, we have known that water is “the main constituent” of the living world. Yet it is first with the Anthropocene crack that we feel that all life, as we know it, exists and only can exist, as far as we know, in this life-critical zone, slightly above and below the surface of the earth (Latour, 2017). To realize that we live *in* an oceanic-tethysian zone is only possible when the understanding of the world as a *stage*, *scene*, or *spaceship*, we are *on*, begins to dissolve.¹⁸ However, when, this happens, as now, we cannot understand how anyone, including ourselves, could go so mad to think that the earth was a ship that we could and should steer and control, where water is not the constituent arche or surrounding of all life, from within and without, but only an abstract entity we can extract. This point when normal becomes madness and unimaginable becomes sensible is also the point where the ecological crisis not only signifies a catastrophe, but also a turning point to a new world. In the last section, I will dive down through the Anthropocene crack to this tethysian ocean.

¹⁸ For an account of the philosophical-historical and conceptual roots of the understanding of the world as a scene, stage, or spaceship, see Paulsen (2021, 2022), who argues it can at least be traced back to the Renaissance.

4. Into a new Anthropocene understanding of our being-in-the-world

The Anthropocene crack is not just words or theory. It happens in many ways. Now. A telling crack-wound-case is *Berl-Berl*, a 2021 artwork by Jacob Kudsk Steensen, an immersive installation that is both a function of the Anthropocene crack and an expansion of it, a doubling out of the wound. The curator, Emma Enderby, describes *Berl-Berl* in the following way:

Berl-Berl starts with a swamp as its protagonist – its ecosystem, history and mythologies – and pays tribute to Berlin’s origin as a wetland that formed over 10,000 years ago and was drained in the 1700s. “Berl,” the ancient Slavic word for swamp, is [...] the origin of “Berlin” and gives the exhibition its name. The artist spent months researching the remaining wetlands of Berlin-Brandenburg, creating an archive of images [and] renders his findings in a 3D plan to create an immersive, absolute landscape [...]. Partnering with the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, he also wove local specimens from their extensive archive into the visual and acoustic world of *Berl-Berl*. As songs were essential to ancient wetland culture and used to navigate the swamp and to share its mythologies, Kudsk Steensen collaborated with sound artist Matt McCorkle and singer Arca to create the world’s soundscape [...] *Berl-Berl* is not only an image of the wetlands – it holds the memories of its past mythologies. Before it was drained, this saturated landscape proved ideal for the settlement of Slavic communities.¹⁹ Sorbian folklore permeates the work’s narrative wherein a Triglav, a deity, appears as a great tree. The artist connects the mythology of this three-headed deity representing three dimensions of Slavic cosmology – Prav (Heaven), Yav (Earth) and Nav (Underworld) – to his understanding of the swamp. In *Berl-Berl*, the ecology is also a Triglav, it moves from undergrowth and fungi to water, leaves, and trees and sky – an entire, holistic landscape [that] becomes a gateway in which relics of the Ice Age connect to present-day wetlands, drawing attention to our current environmental reality. Kudsk Steensen reveals a perspective that would otherwise be impossible to see or experience with the hope of sparking a newfound appreciation for the swamp and to reimagine our role within this ecosystem that sustains us.²⁰

¹⁹ The *Berl-Berl* exhibition catalogue (2021) points out that, with the drainage of the swamp areas of Central and Eastern Europe, a large portion of the Slavic population became homeless, and their culture, myths, and languages were rendered almost extinct.

²⁰ See <https://berlberl.world/introduction>

My impression, as a spectator, is that the installation absorbs me into a living world, pulsating, wet, fishy, scaly, metamorphosing and transmuting without any clear-cut distinctions between flora, fauna, and other things, including digital entities. It gives me a feeling of witnessing the (re)birth of life, transgressing the time–space scales through which we usually perceive the world. My fifteen-year-old daughter, Yrsa, wrote some lines on her impression of the installation I want to add to give a sense of what Berl-Berl can do:

It feels like time is stopped but at the same time faster.

As if you are a small reptile, an insect that can both fly and swim, and this little insect just observes everything it can, takes it in. Up and down land and water what is what? Anything can be anything. A tree or a snake?

A plant or a grasshopper?

Perhaps a mixture? Mountain or tree stump?

One moment it's black and dark dramatic and creepy, the next calm serene bright like the clouds or is it clouds?

Snow, ice, water

Winter Spring Summer Fall.

Everything changes, but we just follow and observe everything that moves, even when it seems like everything is standing still, it changes.

Vanishing, coming, staying?

How long, how short, what?

Everything and nothing.

Really and yet not.

Things that seem familiar but also so unreal.

And what is important?

So simple, yet so complicated

“Just a Swamp”

But no, just no.

It's so incredible.

But most of all it made us, me, you, think. About everything between earth and heaven or nothing at all.

Sounds, high, low, soft, hard.

The water that ripples, the birds that chirp and sing.

The sounds of everything moving and changing.

A bit like people and our lives.

One day we are small and crawling, the next we are old and have difficulty walking.

You don't feel like you're changing, but you still think it's going too fast.

New, old.

Now, tomorrow, in a year.

So much to say, so many words but still empty of words. Nothing to say because the work says it all. Everything you are willing to hear listen see

Just stand sit be here be in the work, be the work.

A human could never say as much as the work says, but still, it doesn't say anything in words, but maybe that's why it says so much. But still, it is people who have created the work, but still because the swamp is there for itself.

Another language that we don't understand but we might try. There is so much that we cannot see and hear so much that we long for.

Many things could be said, but my aim here is only to pay heed to two essential features of Berl-Berl: 1) It is not a coincidence that the artwork is a swamp—otherwise overlooked; it demonstrates what we have forgotten. As Kudsk Steensen makes clear, we have drained most swamps on the earth; only one percent of land is now covered by swamp, but this space holds about ten percent of all biodiversity.²¹ From the perspective of a Late Holocene understanding of water, this draining demonstrates enlightenment, progress, and rationality, making room for cities like Berlin, industrialized agriculture, and so on. However, from the perspective of biodiversity, this draining has been life-negating. 2) It is neither

²¹ Concerning wetlands, the artist Kudsk Steensen has worked together with Dane Sutherland, who, in the exhibition catalogue, links the Berl-Berl installation to the poet, philosopher, and “patron saint of swamps” Henry David Thoreau. For an account of the link between swamps, wetlands, and our aquatic being-in-the-world, see Ryan (2020).

a coincidence that the artwork understands the swamp as an ecology, where everything seems to flow, mutate, and mix with and into everything else, including past, present, future, Slavic culture, sounds, and images, seemingly paradoxically in an artificially made digital world, that nevertheless creeps into our physical sensing bodies. By this, Berl-Berl has opened my senses and body as no influx²² before. Not only did I see something I never had seen before, but I also began to see differently. A *kaleidoscopic shift*²³ in how I sense the world happened. Expanding the Anthropocene crack in my being. Thus, the artwork opens the gate to an oceanic and tethysian understanding of the world. By this, I mean that the artwork is not a *landscape*, as Enderby puts it; it is a *waterscape*²⁴, a living whole, *revealing* that “landscapes” are not really landscapes, but appear so only if seen from the lenses of the Late Holocene. The swamp, with its layers, reaching up to the sky and down to the underworld, lets us see both the smallest and biggest, the things most close to us and the things farthest from us, all part of one sensible dripping whole, with birth and decay, pulsating intrinsically wet; it becomes a realization of a lost understanding, where water is the *arche* of everything; the swamp as a uterus and us, the living beings, as sensing, breathing, in an exchange with the world (Coccia, 2019). What the artwork reveals is a new world understanding that we can dive into and be drenched by. Instead of the earth as a plane, drained of water, where we have tried to order everything according to its usefulness, we can move around, but without intrinsic value, we are called to seeing the world ecologically, here in the sense of a water-world, where all has value, is “godly,” a lost world, drained away, but imaginable, and perhaps restorable. Thus, it destroys our misleading idea of landscapes and clarifies that any life-scape is *oceanic* in the sense that it is surrounded by and invaded by water in which life can evolve, copulate, and spread, and *tethysian* in the sense that it is pregnant with a rich and complex life, gathered in a pulsation of ever becoming living beings. Thus, Berl-Berl remembers what we have forgotten: that we are part of water-life, that flows in us, and which we breathe in, as the water creatures we are, in streams of influx and outflux, sensing and responding, along with other pulsating water creatures, on the blue planet, in the great blue, deep dark ocean that sustains us.

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We can now sum up the difference between the mainstream Western Late Holocene human understanding of our self and the world *and* the early

²² The concept of *influx and efflux* is developed by Bennett (2020).

²³ This concept *Kaleidoscopic shift* comes from Bennett (2017, p. 103).

²⁴ For the concept of *waterscapes*, see Hawke and Spanning (2022).

Anthropocene. The Late Holocene sees the earth as a scene, stage, or spaceship we are *on*, as a world where humans are at the center, acting upon the world, forcing and extracting abstract substances out of the earth, to progress humanity in the direction from the past (premodern) to a projected (late modern) future, with everything else in the background as piles of resources. Here, water is a contingent abstract substance among others. The cosmos, understood as the universe is meaningless, only on the scene, where human acts, things receive meaning in relation to human plans. The surface of the earth is accordingly manipulated, like a LEGO-ontology; water courses are straightened, groundwater is pumped up, wetlands are drained, life is not understood in its essence. The early Anthropocene, on the other hand, sees the earth through the ecological crack-wound that the former self and world understanding has caused, as a living whole, we humans are *in*, together with other living beings, as a pulsating world where water is the *arche*—generative principle, origin, surrounding and “fons et origo, the reservoir of all potentialities of existence”²⁵—of this world, where all life beings, both as singularities and as a whole, have intrinsic value. In this world, there are no clear borders; no one-linear progression, only many simultaneously time–space scales. The human being is not seen as the main actor but is absorbed into the surrounding environment, as a creature among others witnessing the wonder of life. Accordingly, life, water, and living beings are listened to and appreciated *as they are*.

5. Conclusion

We are living beings, living *in* a world of water. The world and living beings have evolved together: two sides of the same pulsating event, gathering and spreading life. Our being-in-the-world is oceanic and tethysian. It is oceanic in the sense that we breath and spread life through and in surrounding water, together with other co-living-beings. It is tethysian in the sense that we are gatherings of life holding water inside and outside, mixing and differentiating us from each other. This is the basic structure of life, of living beings, and of the living world. All three hang together, are aspects of one and the same immersive whole. The principle—*arche*—of this life is water. The result is our godly earth, the tiny life-critical zone, remaking itself, through its relation to itself and to everything else, including the sun. Pulsating, still pulsating. In this cloudy and sparkling divine water-world, in this uterus, deep dark ocean, we humans live and become alive. Yet we are apparently one the most forgetful creatures. In the Late Holocene, a

²⁵ Eliade, 1991: 151, quoted from Hawke and Jackson, 2013: 124.

climatically stable period, of the undulating life-critical zone, we almost forgot that we were living beings in a living world; at least, we forgot what life means and why we live, despite life being in our veins as our basic structure. This took place in a tiny part of the world called *the West*. Here, the mainstream thinkers misunderstood their first philosopher, who said that *water is the origin of everything*, and *everything is full of gods*. They could not understand it. Instead, they believe in another philosopher and, with him, others who thought that the world consists of only of abstract substances, and human reason. This spread to the whole globe and become pure madness, and the climate was not stable anymore; at this point, the Anthropocene crack opened the gateway to a deeper sense of our self and the world, sitting around the corner of the ecological crisis. Yet still in this moment, only a passage, into a being-in-the-world as humans, we can only hope for and aim for, through making artworks like Berl-Berl, through writing this as I am, through paying more attention to our more-than-human life-companions, and through a thousand other things, that we still can do if we dare love this oceanic-tethysian world in which we live.

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Author

Michael Paulsen, Associate Professor, Southern University of Denmark, Denmark.
mpaulsen@sdu.dk

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