

ASKING QUESTIONS

ABOUT ASKING

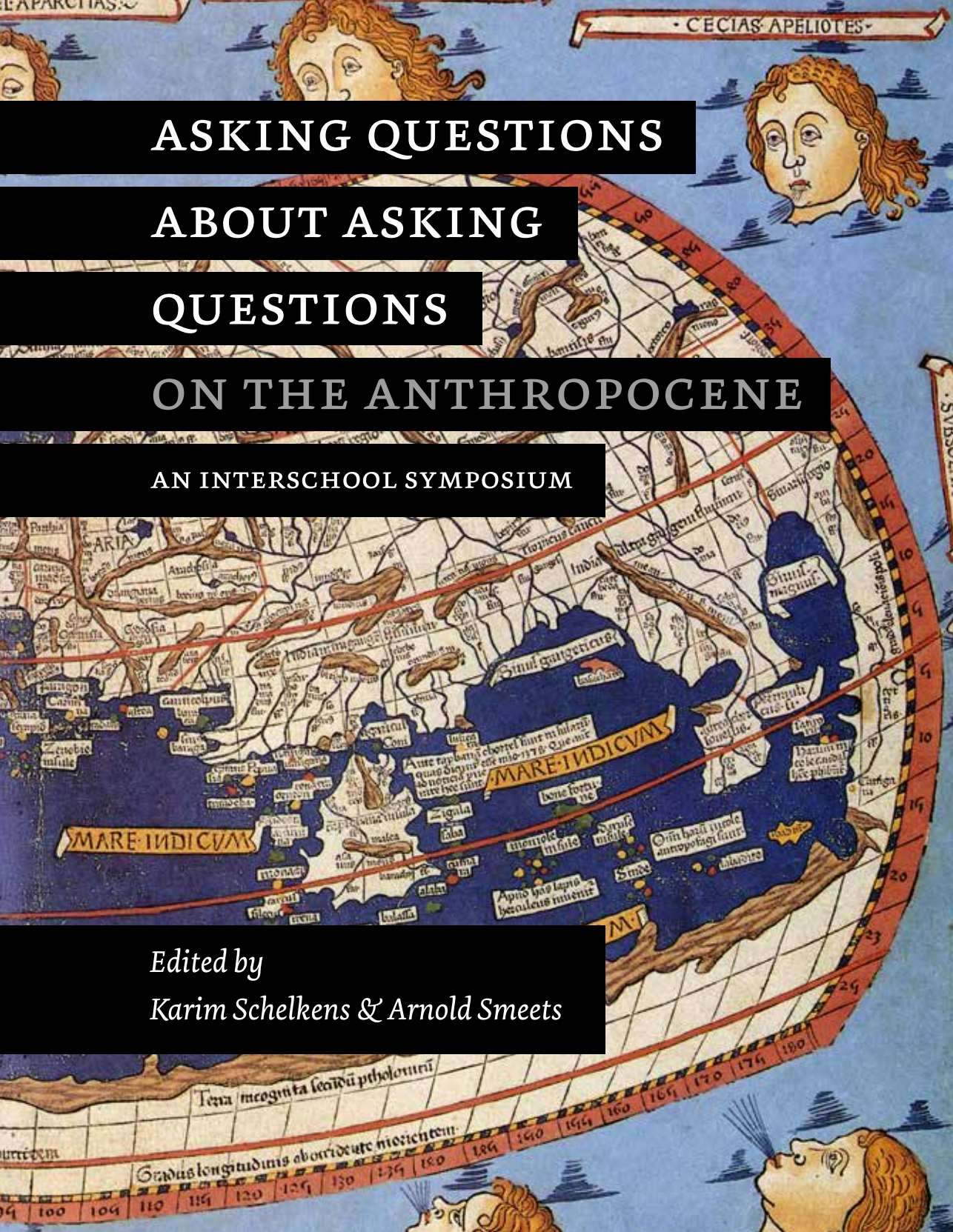
QUESTIONS

ON THE ANTHROPOCENE

AN INTERSCHOOL SYMPOSIUM

Edited by

Karim Schelkens & Arnold Smeets



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FOREWORD

ASKING QUESTIONS AS A MEANS TO

(RE)CONNECT THE DOTS OF SCHOLARSHIP

Karim Schelkens

What can we say about ecology? In its original sense, this buzzword, used on a daily basis by political leaders, economists, the media, and the leaders of the world's largest religious communities, has a double root. It refers both to the Greek *oikos*, or 'household' and to *logos* – a rather complex and open word with a vast array of meanings, ranging from study or doctrine to philosophically more abstract concepts such as 'sense' or even 'essence'. This hasty etymological survey suffices to raise a series of questions. What or whose household are we referring to? And can some sort of underlying logic or even essence of our household conceivably be defined? Are there any universal principles or regulations that can be detected? And, to take it a step further: how should we cope with the fact that, while *oiko-logia* and *oiko-nomia* share the same original root, today's ecologists and economists often seem to regard one another as antagonists? What does it mean 'to be human' in an era marked by the effects of unbridled consumerism and anthropogenic climate change?

Clearly, there is no shortage of questions, and this foreword cannot aspire to provide full-fledged answers. More relevantly, it wishes to point out that this multitude of question marks is consistent with the attitude of curiosity that lies at the very heart of scholarship and intellectual debate. Underneath today's scattered academia, marked by hyper-diverse research cells, international rankings, impact factors and micro-credentials, pressure on outreach, trainings in skills and practices ... curiosity is what still connects researchers.¹ Even if this interconnectedness is facing ever greater obstacles, it is rediscovered and nurtured time and again. In our age, currents such as Team Science reconnect us with the age-old tradition of arguing and questioning in an atmosphere of dialogue and exchange across disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, the old medieval notion of the university as an 'integral' center of learning, connecting the *universitas scientiarum*, may still inspire us.

This reference to the ancient roots of scientific endeavor is not made randomly, of course. The current book is part of the celebrations marking the fifteenth anniversary of Tilburg's School of Catholic Theology, which, as the reader will discover in the last contribution to this volume, is our University's youngest and oldest school. In the preparations for this event, during which we had the assistance of Professor Bart Koet, we decided not to celebrate the anniversary on our own. Instead, we chose to organize an interschool symposium on 'asking questions', and to invite scholars from all Schools for a common reflection. The aim of our anniversary committee (consisting, beside the editors of this volume, of Quirien Hagens MA, Dr. Sam Goyvaerts and Dr. Stefan Gärtner) was to build bridges and to (re)connect the dots between the various islands in the academic archipelago. Initially, we had not planned to publish anything, but precisely the atmosphere of open exchange among a panel of scientists, led by Dr. Roshnee Ossewaarde, spontaneously inspired us to introduce this event to a wider forum as a form of academic best practice, at a time when Tilburg University seeks to promote interdisciplinarity and interschool collaboration.

¹ Cf. W. Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, New York: Free Press, 2014.

Prior to the symposium, which was held in June 2022, all contributors were asked to reflect, not just on the general theme of ‘Asking Questions’, but on how this could be connected with one of the most pressing needs of our era. Without much hesitation, the contributors engaged in an exercise in reflexivity on our common horizon of epochal transition, marked by drastic changes in climate, culture and geology, and our festive occasion became more than a mere leisurely activity. Questioning ‘science-as-usual’ turned out to be an urgent necessity.

In his recent essay collection, *Verschuivingen* or ‘Shifts’, the novelist, poet and philosopher Stefan Hertmans depicts our world as a place marked by shifting grounds.² Geographically so, as landscapes are literally changing, but also on the levels of political discourse and media communication, and in the fields of law, philosophy, and religion. What we are facing is a profound reconfiguration of our worldviews, which have been human-centered for centuries. Rethinking these not just means reconsidering habits and customs, but re-assessing the horizon against which we act, think, speak and believe, and our own role. This demands courage, and the wisdom, as Sophocles already indicated, to combine the old and the new. New models, skills and technologies are needed, but blindly rejecting values and insights of the past is not an option either.

The authors in this volume have decided to face this challenge. They trace new paths, and show that sometimes this is possible by dusting off forgotten models of thought about the place of humankind in its environment. The shifts of our times also touch upon the daily activities of scientists in other ways, as we are asked to abandon longstanding, firm and often privileged institutional positions. Whereas for long, scholars were publicly perceived (and saw themselves) as ‘those who have the answers’, that privileged position is rapidly fading. Today it is perhaps better and wiser to return to a more authentic position. Scientists do not need to possess, and perhaps never possessed, all the answers, but they have always been the people who dare to ask the questions.

2 S. Hertmans, *Verschuivingen*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2022.

In presenting this book, and mindful of everyone who helped prepare our fifteenth anniversary, Tilburg's School of Catholic Theology wishes to offer the University a gift as a sign of the importance of building bridges, in society, in academia, and in faith communities. The latter point brings me back to the Greek etymological roots. Like *oiko-logia* and *oiko-nomia*, the word 'Catholicity' is not, as is often thought, a closed and static term. Catholicity similarly involves the work-in-progress of combining unity and diversity, in ever new contexts. The novelist Hertmans has understood the inclusiveness this requires, as he writes that 'nowadays, a different *kata holos* has emerged: that of all the inhabitants of the earth, united by the great extinction that threatens us, the crisis of an entire planet'. If the era of the Anthropocene calls for a new response, it may precisely be such a holistic take on things, in the knowledge that the open space created by those who dare to ask questions is, to quote the philosopher Ernst Bloch, part and parcel of a cultural praxis of hope.

BEYOND THE HOLY

GRAIL OF LAW

HUMAN AGENCY AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Han Somsen

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS

This symposium on the nature of ‘Asking questions’ in the Anthropocene is the sort of reflexive event which, people would say, separates academic communities from faith communities. Yet the fact that the School of Catholic Theology is the organizer shows that this is not necessarily the case. What I mean by ‘reflexivity’ is important here. It implies a way of thinking that is self-critical to the extent that we are prepared not only to accept to *do* something differently than we have done before, but also that we *are* something or someone different than we thought we were. That implies that organizing this event not only shows wisdom. It also, and this is not insignificant, requires courage.

Courage and wisdom are what we need right now, because the Anthropocene is bringing to an end the so-called Holocene, an epoch that has lasted some twelve thousand year. While our most important propositions and institutions were all formed during the Holocene, now, suddenly, these institutions and propositions seem alarmingly dysfunctional. Hence, we need to come up with something that is fit for our times. This must be an effort of all disciplines, including theology.

I tend to compare our day and age with that of Galileo Galilei (1578-1642). A contemporary of Descartes, he induced a U-turn in our thinking about the world and our spot in it. Galilei forced us to give up our earth-centered ideas and come to terms with a solar-centered system. That took some hardships, but in the end all branches of sciences were compelled to adjust to this. Today, some five centuries later, climate change, the mass extinction of animal and plant species, severe water shortages, hurricanes, forest fires, and other existential dangers, are forcing us to abandon our anthropocentric, humanistic and parochial world views. And I plead guilty to this too: lawyers, economists, psychologists and theologians, we are all – at least, let me speak for myself – teaching our students stuff that no longer fits the pressing needs of our times.

It is ironic, or better, it seems ironic that precisely the theologians, our colleagues who are associated with faith's institutional form (and for that matter with Galilei's seventeenth-century judges who put his work on the *Index of Forbidden Books*), have organized this brainstorm session, inviting us to rethink matters. As a legal scholar, my message at this occasion will be this: the case for law to pledge subservience to nature's universal and supreme regulatory agency has never been more compelling. In other words, I suggest that law should play second fiddle to the regulatory forces of nature. And that, I suspect, is as close to a religious statement as I will ever come – perhaps the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the theological faculty is a fitting occasion for this 'coming out'.

What our raging planet is telling us, is that human-made legal distinctions between humans and nature, between local and global, between private and public, and present and future, are wiping out humans and nature alike. Far-

mers are perishing because their land is becoming sterile. Bangladesh and Pakistan are being flooded because the Chinese are burning coal to produce our western steel. A private decision to sell live bats at a Wuhan wet market has caused a global and very public pandemic. This impels us to reflect, for decisions we take now will determine the lives of younger and future generations. There is ample evidence that the distinctions we have relied upon in the past have become dysfunctional.

Clearly, the Anthropocene also casts doubt on some of the most fundamental presuppositions that define my discipline, law. And, as I said, the kind of stuff I teach my first-year students, for instance, is informed by precisely the dichotomies which I just claimed are false and are even killing us. Let me speak therefore about the holy grail of lawyers: the rule of law. For a start, support for the rule of law is nearly universal. It is hard to find anyone who does not, in one way or another, subscribe to the idea that the rule of law is necessary. Yet, we should be bold enough to also ask whether the rule of law might not also be a root cause for some of the misery our angry planet is currently dishing up.

I owe you an explanation, because it is not a minor thing to question the rule of law. Let me start with the law as a source of regulation. The law is a source of regulation because it sets behavioral change in motion. Markets, societal rules, self-regulating technology also regulate in that sense: they are all sources which establish behavioral change. However, by virtue of the rule of law, law claims supremacy over these alternative regulatory sources.

We are governed not by Elon Musk's technologies, nor by religious communities or markets, but by law. It is the *law* which has the final word. In justification of this supremacy, it is said that the law is 'made by you and me', legislation is a product of national democratic processes. The rule of law also protects us from dictatorship by the mob. Liberalism and capitalism could not survive without the rule of law – which is an important observation in the context of what we teach our students. Conversely, the rule of law could happily function without liberalism or capitalism. That said, it is in fact a one-way relationship, but it comes as no surprise that law and liberal market economies are cozy bedfellows.

Now let us return to the question: why should the Anthropocene make us think critically about the rule of law? I can only be brief here. First, there is a general agreement that law claims supremacy over the regulatory agency of nature. Nature regulates, through the hydro and carbo cycles for instance, and law then states: that may very well be the case, but law has the final word. A good example of this order are the current heated debates in the Dutch House of Representatives, known in Dutch as *De Tweede Kamer*, about agricultural nitrates and the future of farming. It is the government that feels it has the right to decide if and how to take account of the problem that nature poses. It is up to us, it is our call whether we are willing to listen to nature's pleas. In what follows, I will contrast this with three arguments.

First, only recently we have come to realize that, in fact, we'd do well to remember that we humans cannot live without nature, but that nature can live perfectly well without humans. Realizing that is not a minor insight. Thinking it through it becomes clear that nature's regulatory systems, sometimes called 'earth systems', should enjoy supremacy over law. This is a common-sense perspective. Who is in charge? Not us.

Second, law is always local, and in the final analysis even international law is no different. By contrast, nature's regulatory systems, the very systems that determine our existence, are not by nature local and cannot be detached. Natural systems are interdependent, are global, and are universal. Here is a contrast: while law ultimately regards the protection of species and habitats, or of a watercourse or ambient air quality as a local concern, it clearly it is not fit to match natural reality.

A third point that makes me think critically about the rule of law, is that the rule of law, at least how it is currently operating in the European Union, privileges the individual at the expense of the collective. And it does so in a way that is unsustainable. In the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights, 'human dignity' is deemed to be inviolable. With its person-centered take, the interest of the individual is always at the heart of the Union's concerns. The pandemic has shown that individual wellbeing cannot exist without attention to collective wellbeing, and that the dichotomy between the

public and the private which we hold as self-evident, often makes little sense to the extent that the separation of these domains itself undermines both the individual and the collective.

In result, it is clear that the rule of law sits uneasily with the realities of the Anthropocene. For a legal scholar, who believes firmly in the rule of law, that is a big thing to say. One might argue that the rule of law is a human-made institution, and that it should therefore be possible to change the way it works. This is indeed what we should want to do, but the process is very difficult and slow. Laws are made democratically, and from within human-centered constitutional systems. That implies that we have the possibility of issuing a collective veto against anything we don't like. My bet is, in a rather pessimistic way, that short-term human interest will trump long-term human interest. Never mind non-human interest. We have to bear this fact – that we hold a collective veto against change – clearly in mind. On such rare occasions that we collectively decide to act in support of more holistic goals, in the long-term interests of both humans *and* nature, individual rights such as the right to own property amounts to a second individual veto. Here too, the farmers are a good example. If the government were to propose a ban on farming on land adjacent to nature reserves, the farmers concerned may invoke their right to property.

All in all, there is a lot of work to do. Universities, by virtue of their independence and their expertise, should be at the forefront of that work. An event like this is a very good start, I am grateful to be part of it.

ORPHAN EARTH

Alkeline van Lenning

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS

When the conveners of this symposium presented the topic ‘Asking questions about questions’ to me, I grappled a bit with it. Eventually, I decided to tackle the theme, based on the insight that questions are always asked within a certain framework. Sometimes we need new concepts to be able to ask different questions and build a more apt framework. In this talk, bearing in mind the context of the Anthropocene, I will propose a shift with respect to four concepts. These shifts will make new questions possible and maybe redefine the situation. I will take the liberty to use my personal memories as a *Leitmotiv*, simply because I know my personal history is quite a common one for Dutch people of my age, rendering my history into an apt illustration of how things have changed.

The First Concept: Rethinking the Global

It was not until the 1990s that ‘the Global’ emerged as a popular term. Today, the global expansion of humankind is apparent in virtually all aspects of our lives. A couple of weeks ago, on television, I was watching two engineers dismantle a small vacuum cleaner. The apparatus appeared to contain over a hundred small components that stemmed from all over the world: India, China, the United States, Germany, Bulgaria, you name it. All of these parts consisted of materials that had been transported to low-wage countries to be assembled there and if one tiny component breaks, one has simply to throw away the vacuum cleaner. While one of the technicians stated that the machine, once broken, is not repairable, he added that this is what you get in a capitalist free market. Products are assembled as cheaply as possible and are not meant to last. Capitalism in a global world is very successful at cheapening things. Not only vacuum cleaners. It excels in producing cheap food, cheap fashion, cheap machinery ... etc. – all at the expense of life on the planet, which is bearing the costs of this cheapening.

The banal example of the vacuum cleaner rekindled memories of my parents who, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, repaired every broken household item they could. My father was a shoemaker and my mother a seamstress, so we never bought our clothes in a shop. My mother used to manufacture dresses for my older sister from her own worn-down dresses, and once my sister grew out of them it was my turn to wear them for a couple of years. At the time it was evident, today we call this slow fashion. My father took care of our shoes until they literally fell apart.

Both my parents lost their jobs because of globalization. Low-wage economies took over their activities. But they applied the skills they had learnt to our household. They never spoke about globalization. In those days, the term was an academic concept used only by political scientists.

In recent times, the notion of the global has come under criticism. It is argued that this concept of ‘global’ is essentially a human-centric construction, and

that by contrast, the idea of ‘the planetary’ is required to decenter the human.¹ Doing so puts human beings back in their place, it acknowledges that the planet is greater than us humans. We might call this ‘the third great decentering’, following the sixteenth-century Copernican Revolution, which decentered humankind within the solar system, and the nineteenth-century Darwinian decentering, dethroning the supreme position of humans by reconsidering the natural history of the planet. In all of this, it is clear that we must understand the category ‘planet’ not merely as an entity without which we would not exist, but also as an entity with a history that precedes ours. That said, my first proposal for a conceptual shift is to replace our focus on the global by a focus on the planetary.²

The Second Concept: Rethinking Colonization

Back to my personal history. I remember an uncle of mine as being a nervous wreck. My parents explained me that this was due to traumas he had experienced as a Dutch soldier in Indonesia. In his presence, it was forbidden to us children to ask any questions about this nation. Upon the Indonesian declaration of independence, the Dutch government refused to recognize the Republic of Indonesia as a sovereign state, but regarded the decolonizing forces as a rebellious movement within the ‘colony of the Dutch East Indies’. As is known, the government of the Netherlands did not call the events a war of independence, but chose to speak of an ‘uprising’, warranting several brutal ‘police actions’ (1947, 1948 and 1949). Today this reminds us of Putin speaking about the war in Ukraine as a military action liberating the people. Like most people in the Netherlands back then, my parents never asked any critical questions on the topic and it has taken Dutch society quite some time before it could see and acknowledge what had actually happened.

After the publication of his impressive book *Revolusi*, dealing with this period of decolonization, the historian David van Reybrouck recently took matters

- 1 E. Meijer, ‘Het huidige verhaal van de mens is problematisch’, in *NRC* April 8, 2022; M. Kruk, ‘De aarde slaat terug’, in *NRC* 1 april, 2022.
- 2 D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago: University Press, 2021.

further when he delivered the 2021 Huizinga lecture.³ Under the header of *The Colonization of the Future*, he argues that we may well have stopped colonizing continents, yet we are busy colonizing the future with the same ruthlessness, the same greed, and the same shortsightedness applied to other continents in the past. Colonialism has ceased to be a purely territorial or geographical notion, it has now become temporal. In the past, we restructured and molded the world through imperial colonization of what we thought to be newly-discovered lands, thereby forever impacting the fate of entire societies. Now, in the 21st century, our exploitative way of living causes issues such as pollution, deforestation, desertification, and an historically unwitnessed decline in biological diversity, all of which will have devastating impacts on future generations and their construction of society.

So, the second shift I propose is to reconsider our discourse on colonization, moving our understanding from something that happened in the past, toward an understanding of colonization as a lingering temporal phenomenon with devastating effects on future societies, who are being treated as colonies of the present.

The Third Concept: Rethinking Climate Crisis

I was still living with my parents when in 1973, the first oil crisis hit the economy. It excited me when there were ten car-free Sundays late in 1973 and in January of the next year, because of the unique experience that we were allowed to cycle on the motorway. Later, when the second oil crisis arrived in 1979, I was studying at university and living on my own. The crisis was caused by unrest in the Middle East, where the Persian Shah had to flee before the Iranian Revolution, only to make way for the new leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. This time I understood the socio-political origins and the economic consequences of the crisis, and I was glad once it passed. Since that seemed to be what crises naturally do: they come and then they disappear again. This common understanding of a crisis as a temporary and passing phenomenon, has led the

3 D. van Reybrouck, *Revolusi: Indonesië en het ontstaan van de moderne wereld*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2020;
D. van Reybrouck, *De kolonisatie van de toekomst*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2022.

recently deceased French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour to argue that we should stop speaking of a climate crisis. Instead the more accurate discourse is that of climate disaster. While crises come and go, disasters are understood to leave severe and permanent imprints.⁴

In my childhood, my parents were not concerned with saving the planet; in fact almost nobody was back then. And strikingly, their ecological footprint was much smaller even than that of an engaged, responsible Western citizen nowadays. Summer holidays were a modest affair, we never left the country; we had no car. We never asked: where will we go this summer? It was an exciting journey on its own to take a bus to Schiphol Airport and watch airplanes take off and land, to see the proud happy few boarding. Such experience was a far cry from the situation at Schiphol today.

Having proposed three conceptual shifts (from the global to the planetary, from spatial colonization to temporal colonization, and from climate crisis to climate disaster), I finally touch upon the notion of the Anthropocene.

The Fourth Concept: Rethinking the Anthropocene

Paul Crutzen, the Dutch Nobel Prize laureate for chemistry, tirelessly applied the term ‘Anthropocene’ to designate ‘the era of the human being’, characterized by the industrial revolution and climate change.⁵ However, some voices now argue that this classification is too abstract, and scholarship tends to indicate that the industrial revolution as such was not the origin of the trouble. While in the ongoing debates, a multitude of concepts has been proposed, I would prefer to use the term ‘Capitalocene’. From the sixteenth century onward, the economic greed that we associate with capitalism has led to an ‘extraordinary reshaping of nature’.⁶ My fourth and final proposal is a discourse shift from Anthropocene to Capitalocene, so as to indicate that capitalism as

4 B. Baker, *The language of climate change and the Anthropocene*, 5 February 2019, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/language-climate-change-and-anthropocene>.

5 W. Steffen *et al.*, ‘The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship’, in *Ambio* 40/7 (2011), p. 739-761. Doi: 10.1007/s13280-011-0185-x.

6 J.W. Moore, ‘The Capitalocene. Part One: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis’, in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44/3 (2017), p. 594-630. Doi: 10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036.

a factor ought to be taken seriously. We ought not merely to understand it as an economic system, but as a potentially devastating way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of nature.

Some Closing Thoughts

Adding to the few things I told about my youth, I would like to state that I enjoyed a happy childhood. Our parents loved us, their children, and loved each other. They were not rich, but as children we never fell short of anything and received our fair shares. Compared to the love and care they offered us, humankind has treated the planet as an orphan, depriving it of due love or care. Such are the costs of the capitalist drive to enhance the circulation of ever cheaper goods. My parents were actors in a circular economy, to them everything was expensive. They had no other option; maintenance and repair was their default state. Their framework was different and they asked different questions. Today everything has become cheaper, more affordable, yet we are living the paradox of being decentered as human beings on the one hand, and bearing a greater responsibility than ever for planet earth and its future.

I do not know about you, but amidst all of this, I treasure small initiatives that experiment with other ways of living. Since I refuse to give up hope, my interest goes out to lifestyles that respect our planet. Arguing that what we do matters, even if we do not know how and when, the American writer and historian Rebecca Solnit has said that hope is not necessarily naïve. She maintains that it is powerful, and that it can coexist with grief and worries. In the past, people were mobilized into action because they hoped for a better future, and many things changed for the better because of their actions. Let us remember that.

WHY ARE WE NOT
MAKING MORE
PROGRESS ON THE
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

Tobias Klein

During this event, devoted to asking big questions, I would like to offer a reflection from my perspective as an economist. As you probably know, economics is more about practical issues, so this is a nice challenge for me. I will also tell you something about economics as a discipline. After all, we represent various academic disciplines and wish to learn from one another. As for introducing you into economics, this (almost) always entails making a distinction between preferences and constraints. Whereas preferences are ‘what people want’, constraints are ‘what they have to deal with’. For instance, you may wish to do otherwise, but you can spend a euro only once. In addition, economists usually presume that decision makers act according what is in their best interest and that there is some kind of equilibrium when people interact with one another. At such juncture, we argue that a market is in equilibrium.

In addition, economists like to think in terms of outcomes. For example, we are interested in how much everyone consumes. This, taken in itself, is a quantity that can easily be measured, which is useful when it comes to documenting what is happening in the economy. We are much less inclined to think about the processes that get us there, and here lies a point of interest, or even of questioning them. I think it is actually something economists should think about more, because how we feel about the world in fact often depends on the processes and experiences that brought us where we are. Such experiences often fall outside of the scope of our models and cannot be measured easily, but the point Alkeline van Lenning made earlier indicates well that they should not be neglected. One might have little in terms of economic or monetary value, but nevertheless have a lot in terms of happiness. This introduces another type of value-discourse: what is important is how we treat one another when we make decisions, and how we live our lives, not just how much we consume. To put it differently, the classic focus in economics might benefit from broadening.

Another defining characteristic is that economists like to think about how to make the pie bigger. At the same time, we tend to stay away from the question how the pie should be divided. As a matter of fact, attention for morality is an element lacking in most economic theories. We seem to be very good at always finding a way around it. This is not entirely disconnected from the reflection on what economists are. Sometimes they are represented as scientists, on other occasions they appear as engineers, and at times they are seen as plumbers, as Huei-Chun Su (Oxford University) and David Colander (Middlebury University) recently wrote in the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*.

Such distinctions prove to be quite useful as a way to describe this particular academic craft. Economists are scientists, as they provide a general framework to think about all sorts of things. They are also engineers, in the sense that they apply a general and broad framework to particular situations. In the end, economists can rightfully be called plumbers. They go into detail and solve small, well-defined problems, and design a certain policy or implement a specific mechanism.

So much for the general picture. As I have said, economists tend to stay away from the big questions. One reason is that many of these big questions, such as the meaning of life or morality, lie outside their area of expertise. Maybe these questions are indeed too big for us. Instead, we like to think about more concrete questions such as: what makes people happy? What we like about this is that it is a well-defined question, which can be answered using data. Another way to put this is to say that economists like to keep it simple.

Is this a problem? When I received the invitation for this event the organizers alluded to the Sustainable Development Goals as a reference point. That is interesting, as we do not look at them every day, I believe economists in fact have a lot to say about these global goals for our common future. Take number one, 'No Poverty', for instance, or perhaps number five, on 'Gender Equality'. A huge amount of research exists on both these topics, in particular on how exactly we can make progress. This is a valuable evolution. It is good news that economics can in fact contribute to such aims by showing what works and what does not, and economists feel comfortable doing that. For instance, there is a large portion of research that explain viable possibilities to have more money and resources entering countries in need, so to help them develop themselves and decrease the degree of poverty.

In fact, looking more closely at the seventeen global goals from my perspective as an economist, it is altogether quite clear 'how' they can be realized, which leads me to the bigger question I would like to put forward: When research is available and options are mapped and known, 'why' are we not making more progress?

Might there be some inconvenient truth that keeps us from making progress? Perhaps it is so difficult and the huge work needed to take significant steps forwards stalls, because it requires us to divide the pie differently? Mindful of Alkeline van Lenning's reference to the 'colonization of the future' we may need to consider giving more to future generations, giving more to other people around us, and with the eye-opener of a planetary gaze, perhaps give more to other parts of the world? This raises further questions: maybe people are unwilling to agree to that? Could it be that we agree on the goals themselves, but simply cannot agree on who should pay for them?

Striking examples of this contradictive attitude are seen when young people say that they are firmly against child labor, yet they buy their goods at cheap market retailers like Primark and H&M. The same unease can be felt when we notice that many of us will state that they care about the environment, but nevertheless fly to our holiday destinations. The inconvenience in these truths is hard to deny.

So, might there be, in the discourse of my field of scholarship, a discrepancy between what economists call 'stated preferences' on the one hand and 'revealed preferences' on the other? When people are asked what they find we ought to do, they will provide with all kinds of great answers. These are stated preferences. But once they have to pay for it, somehow the answers and behaviors change. That is what we call revealed preferences. Personally, I struggle with this gap, and as economists we are inclined to contribute to examining the question by asking everyone how much it would be worth to them, in monetary value, in euros, to make progress on these goals. Imagine we do that, and imagine a majority of people indicating that, while they find achieving the global goals important, others should have to pay for it. The big question remaining then is: what should we do? Finding an answer to that seems crucial.

REFLEXIVITY AND ITS
DISCONTENTS

Peter Achterberg

This Interschool event, asking to reflect upon the nature of questions itself, addresses a very interesting theme. And as it aligns to a certain extent with my own research agenda, I will take the opportunity to share some thoughts on ‘people who ask questions about people who ask questions’. Those I refer to are typically people who feel ill at ease with the very idea of reflexivity. And who better to start with than Thierry Baudet? He is in a sense the typical anti-reflexive person (see figure 1).



BAUDET VS. HIEMSTRA

Figure 1.

Those who have been following the Dutch news, will know that Thierry Baudet fiercely disagrees with Gerrit Hiemstra, although not – as you can see from these Twitter fragments – when Hiemstra is forecasting the weather. When Gerrit Hiemstra predicts rain, even Thierry Baudet wears a raincoat (see Figure 1, on the right). However, when Hiemstra talks about forecasts over a longer period, using more or less the same methods as when forecasting the weather for the upcoming days, but with a longer scope and related to the climate, then suddenly, Baudet judges that Hiemstra ‘ought to be fired’ (Figure 1, on the left and in the middle). As a sociologist, I find that interesting. Why can a meteorologist be trusted and a climate scientist, using the same methodological toolbox, attacked? To try and answer this, I will start with the idea of ‘reflexive modernization’, a concept developed by Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Scott Lash.¹ Reflexive modernization refers to our tendency to deal analytically with our modern-day solutions to all kinds of problems. Take for instance the situation of gas extraction in Groningen. We had a problem: we needed energy; and we found the solution: we started to extract gas from the soil. This effectively solved the problem of energy scarcity, until we realized that our human intervention also caused other major problems. According

¹ U. Beck, A. Giddens & S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford University Press, 1994.

to the aforementioned sociologists, these kinds of problems are all we think about nowadays: we reflect on our own modern-day solutions. It is a very analytical approach to our solutions.

Moreover, virtually all of the problems that we face are human-made. The earthquakes in Groningen, for instance, are not a natural phenomenon, but have been caused by human actions. The same can be said about the global climate change, which fits neatly with the idea of the Anthropocene, namely that we are the cause of many problems. Here at this university, an institution of higher education, none of this is a surprise, we all know it. Research indicates that this line of thought is mostly shared by more highly educated and analytically motivated persons.² The question then is whether or not these people have lower trust in our modern-day solutions, which are often fueled by scientific inventions or knowledge. This is still a matter for debate; in some cases they do, and in some they do not.³

But I do not want to talk about highly educated people. They are not that interesting. I would like to talk about the others, who have been researched by Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap in a paper on anti-reflexivity.⁴ They looked at people who reject the idea that humans are the cause of everything that is wrong with and in our world, people who are opposed to the idea of the Anthropocene. McCright and Dunlap suggest that this is a reaction against reflexively modern currents in our society. You might expect this to lead to a wholesale rejection of science, but interestingly that is not the case. In fact, these people like a particular kind of science: productive science, which makes something or provides policy advice. They detest what is called ‘impact science’: the science that studies the consequences of human actions.⁵

2 P. Achterberg, W. de Koster & J. van der Waal, ‘A Science Confidence Gap: Education, Trust in Scientific Methods, and Trust in Scientific Institutions in the United States’, in *Public Understanding of Science* 26/6 (2017), p. 704-720.

3 G.W. Gauchat, ‘A Test of Three Theories of Anti-Science Attitudes’, in *Sociological Focus* 41/4(2008), p. 337-357. A.M. McCright & R.E. Dunlap, ‘Anti-reflexivity’, in *Theory, Culture & Society* 27/2-3 (2010), p. 100-133.

5 P.J. Jacques, R.E. Dunlap & M. Freeman, ‘The Organization of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Skepticism’, in *Environmental Politics* 17/3 (2008), p. 349-385; R. Cordova, P. Achterberg & E. Gielens, ‘A Trump Effect on Political Discussions About Science? A Structural Topic Analysis of U.S. Congress Members’ Tweets’, submitted paper, 2022; A.M. McCright & R.E. Dunlap, ‘The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public’s Views of Global Warming, 2001–2010’, in *The Sociological Quarterly* 52/2 (2011), p. 155-194.

I did some research for my paper at this meeting and I would like to share my initial analysis with you. The assumption is that more left-wing and higher-educated people tend to be more concerned about the environment than their more right-wing and lower-educated counterparts. And, moreover, that this is the case to a greater extent in reflexively modern contexts. To measure this, I used the standard measure for knowledge economies, the European Values Study, which I am proud to say is one of the outputs of my department.⁶

Figures 2 and 3 show what people think about the environment in several European countries.⁷ I used a couple of relevant items and then produced a scale for environmental concern and tried to figure out how left-wing or right-wing and higher or lower-educated people reacted in different countries. It is rather reassuring that the more advanced a society is, the more reflexively modern it is, and the more people generally are aware of various environmental issues. This is also the case for lower-educated people. However, there is a growing disparity between the higher and lower-educated. This is not that visible in the graph, but it is significant in the model. It might be said, therefore, that polarization is taking place between higher and lower-educated people (see Figure 4).

6 A.M. Price, L.P. Peterson, 'Scientific Progress, Risk, and Development: Explaining Attitudes Toward science Cross-Nationally', in *International Sociology* 31/1 (2016), p. 57-80.

7 <https://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/maptool.html>.



Figure 2: Atlas of European Values.

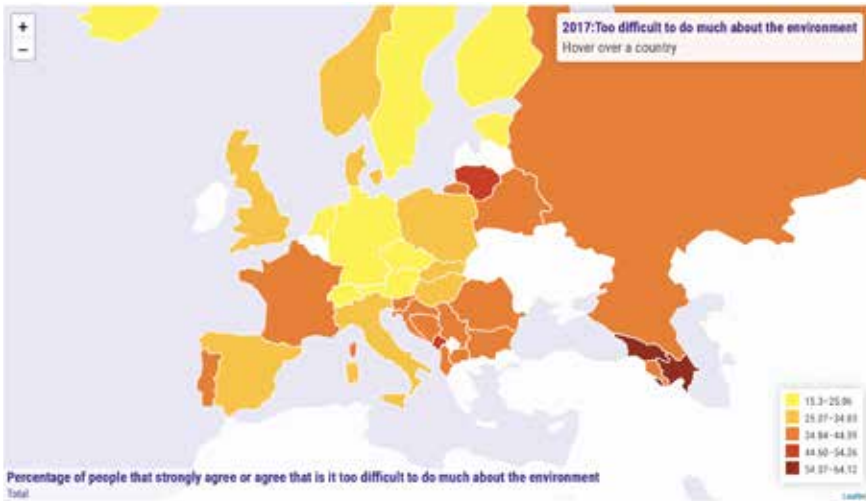


Figure 3: Atlas of European Values.

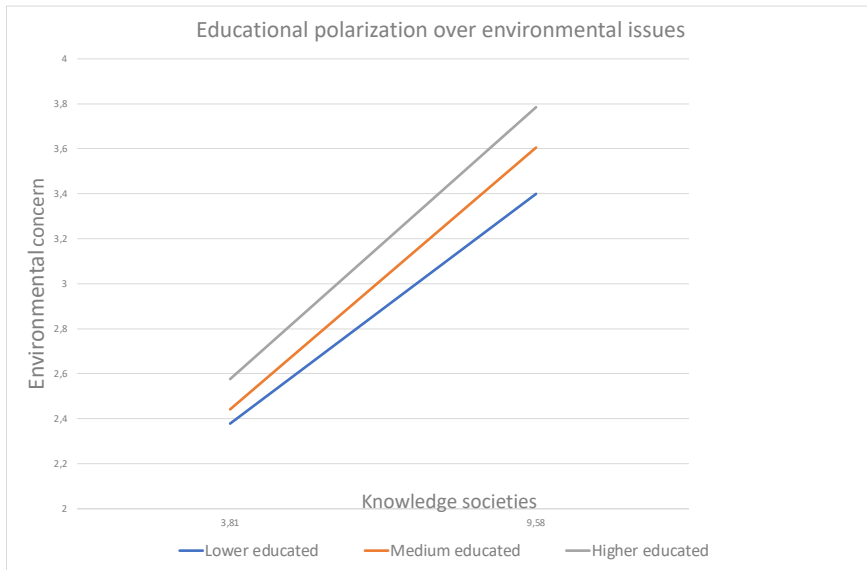


Figure 4.

This polarization is more pronounced between the more left-wing and the more right-wing (Figure 5). The graph shows that people who are politically on the right fail to increase their environmental concerns in these knowledge-rich societies as much as people who are politically more to the left. This similarly illustrates the polarization on these kinds of issues currently dividing Europe.

In conclusion, people generally are more concerned about the environment in advanced reflexively modern societies. Reflexively-minded people, the higher-educated and left-wing self-identifiers are most concerned with the environment. Yet their anti-reflexive counterparts, people who are lower-educated and right-wing, are less committed to the environment. The tensions between these groups are substantial and are growing in advanced reflexively modern societies in Europe.

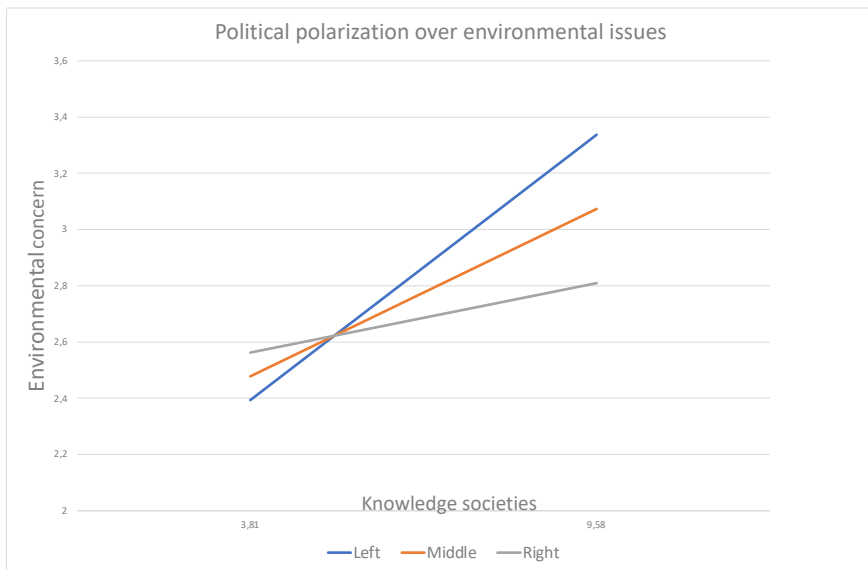


Figure 5.

So Thierry, who raises questions about Gerrit’s climate change questions, is not alone. Both Baudet and Hiemstra might be regarded as representatives of large-scale societal polarization. This gives rise to all sorts of questions. For instance, what is the relevance of this for confidence in different fields of scientific expertise? I am in the process of gathering data and when that will have concluded in a few months’ time, the data will analyze themselves. Hopefully, these data will help me explain why people on the right tend to trust economists – like Tobias Klein – way more than sociologists like me. Perhaps that is because sociologists are more into impact science than the typical economist is. And then, of course, there is the question of how to deal with such polarization. But that is a matter for another occasion.

**SUSTAINABLE USE
OF TERRESTRIAL
ECOSYSTEMS AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE**

THEOLOGY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Paul van Geest & Arnold Smeets

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS

If one thing, this symposium shows that the different Schools of Tilburg University, a university devoted to understanding people and society, are developing interesting insights on the future of our society in and after the Anthropocene, the era in which human activity is, for the first time in history, having serious consequences for the state of ‘Mother Earth’. Theologians are compelled to contribute to the development of these understandings. In classic Christian anthropology, human beings have been regarded as ‘the crown of creation’, but this is not unequivocal, for traditionally they are regarded as ‘co-creators’, whom has been given the responsibility to keep creation as a whole intact.

In recent encyclicals, Pope Francis has time and again displayed what might be called the prophetic power of tradition, precisely by underlining this responsibility. His reflections on the interplay between economy and ecology, between social justice and concern for the climate, leave nothing to the imagination. And when looking into matters more closely, he is not the first pope to do so. In fact, previous pivotal moments in the development of global economy and Western society have inspired religious leaders with a vast impact, and such are popes, to address the position of humans in their natural surroundings and the consequences of their behavior.

I

In what history books call the modern era, and more in particular in the late nineteenth-century, an age when the industrial revolution gained steam through all kinds of technical innovations and developments, an influential pope already raised his voice against the undeniable downsides of unbridled entrepreneurial progress. In his 1891 encyclical ‘on the new things’, *Rerum novarum*, Leo XIII sharply criticized the exploitation and resulting poverty of the workers. He argued that every worker should be paid a salary that would enable him to accumulate as much private property as necessary to guarantee his family an orderly life of well-being. And he condemned capitalism to the extent that it led to ‘inhuman practices’ on the part of factory owners and to ‘all-consuming usury, driven [...] by greedy speculators’ (*Rerum novarum* 2). On the other hand, Leo XIII – a child of his time – rejected the solution of socialism, then on the upsurge, and its advocacy of collectivization of the means of production. He considered this to be contrary to the person’s right to property from which human beings derive part of their dignity. More important than these rejections of what he regarded as the extremes on either side, was his plea for a balanced society, and his rejection of an overly stress on individual gains.

A second pivotal moment in modern history came when Pope Pius XI published the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*. In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression that followed the 1929 stock market crash, and at a moment when the

United States and Europe suffered from extremely high unemployment rates, this pope fought poverty by vehemently protesting the growing inequality in Western society. A society in which only a small group benefited from the advantages of new inventions, but where the largest group, workers, remained condemned to poverty due to their puny wages, was seen as unjust. Pius denounced the economic despotism of the few at the expense of the prosperity of the many. A fair market economy, he wrote in *Quadragesimo anno*, must be aimed at the welfare of all people, and this means specifically that economic freedom can never be the regulative principle of the economy. Excessive economic liberalism will hinder the enshrining of social virtues such as ‘social justice’ and ‘social charity’.

Another six decades later, in 1991, the context of world political and economic developments had again drastically changed. After a long Cold War era, the Berlin Wall had collapsed when a Polish Pope, John Paul II, wrote the encyclical *Centesimus annus*. With history on his side, just after the downfall of communism in the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries, he warned against the dangers of excessive state power. In his idea, the state’s main task was to create the preconditions for societies and cooperation at a sub-state level. In this way, individuals are better able to flourish and people can receive more adequate aid when faced with poverty. Like his predecessors, John Paul II criticized the free market as the most effective tool for ‘harnessing resources and responding effectively to needs’. And again, like his predecessors, he warned of the dangers of poverty and injustice that would arise if free trade is not based on and limited by an ethical and value driven order.

The observant reader will have noticed the rhythm underlying this series of papal encyclicals: *Rerum novarum* was written in 1891, *Quadragesimo anno* (meaning ‘After forty years’) four decades years later, and John Paul II’s *Centesimus annus* (‘The hundredth year’) celebrated the centennial anniversary of Leo XIII’s charter. Admittedly, the choice of titles was not highly original, but these encyclicals do express a certain continuity in the Catholic Church’s social thought.

II

The current, fourth pivot point in our list puts us in a new context, one characterized by ever-increasing globalization and by an unseen ecological crisis. The Anthropocene is definitely upon us. In this age, the tradition of Catholic thought on social justice is ever more combined with an emphasis on humanity's responsibility for the 'integrity of creation'. In 2009, Benedict XVI wrote *Caritas in veritate*, 'Love in truth'. This encyclical reads like an urgent appeal to the international political community. Globalization, the pope argued, should make people more aware that they are all part of one and the same human family, and should foster care for one another like brothers and sisters. The pope did not hesitate to stress that trade agreements should never encourage markets to become places where the rich oppress the poor. This dynamic can be broken by giving a greater role to *caritas*, in the market. This entails a shift in focus, as monetary value is replaced by another type of value, that of charity. *Caritas in veritate*, 'love in truth', ideally takes the shape of criteria to ensure that economic actors act justly, that they pursue prosperity and well-being for all, and are aware that 'the economy' must contribute to the unfolding of the intrinsic dignity of every human being.

While Benedict's voice was still strongly human-centered, a change of tone is noticeable under Pope Francis. Although the continuity with his predecessors is recognizable, there are also clear discontinuities in papal discourse, in the sense of a broadening. Experts point to Pope Francis's different, non-Roman and even non-Western perspective. A perspective that is, in a sense, more global and has a keener eye for the destructive forces of unbridled progress and injustice and the planet as a whole. This may well be why *Laudato si'*, published in 2015, is likely to become one of the Christian tradition's great encyclicals: ecology and social justice go hand in hand in view of the defense of an 'integral ecology'. This Latin American pope writes penetratingly about the worrying state of 'Mother, Sister Earth', and passionately decries the fact that climate change, the scarcity of drinking water and declining biodiversity affect the poor in the first place. He points to the poignant interwovenness of climate change and the unbridled needs of consumption for people in rich countries. The core of Catholic social thought comes to the fore when Pope

Francis describes international solidarity as necessary:

Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth. (*Laudato si'* 92)

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis articulates the practical consequences of this insight to a greater extent than his predecessors did, and in stronger terms. For him, personal property should never come at the expense of the common good, and the idea of the common good is seen in a broad sense: it includes the interests of the poor and that future generations. Solidarity creates the social preconditions that allow people in poor countries to live with dignity. If there is no substantial commitment to those who suffer, the 'globalization of indifference' will fester. He makes it very clear that the ecological crisis is rooted in a moral crisis in the hearts of people in prospering countries. According to Pope Francis, the failure of first-world citizens to let their motives be informed by the values of the gospel leads to greater poverty for those who depend on the rich. Ultimately, this *habitus* will cause not only the demise of a civilization and a culture, but above all of the devastation of 'our common home'.

III

The urgency of the message of critics of the Anthropocene, contained in the Sustainable Development Goals is reminiscent of prophetic speech. And it is strikingly close to the social agenda of Christians. Time and again, the Church has denounced unjust economic mechanisms that increase poverty for large parts of the world's population. The respective popes have aimed to instill a sense that brotherhood and sisterhood, solidarity and substantial commitment to people who live below the poverty line, are the most viable solutions to end poverty. Again and again, papal statements have confronted the with the dark downsides of their actions, and their co-responsibility for the crisis that emerged in the Anthropocene.

Pope Francis takes this a step further. He also criticizes the dominance of unbridled liberalism and the free market, but his emphasis on the intrinsic link between the purity of personal motives and morality and the dynamics of the market economy has been firmer and more explicit than his predecessors. The market economy can only be good if it is based and oriented on principles governed by the primacy of human dignity. But now, human dignity is placed within a larger attention for the care for the planet. Pope Francis has expressed such dreams, when writing about a restoration of ecological balance in the endangered Amazon region:

I dream of an Amazon region that can jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests. (*Querida Amazonia* 7)

The most urgent advice he gives us humans in the Anthropocene is that the whole of nature is not there for us to exploit, *uti* in Latin, but on the contrary, we must *frui*, enjoy it. Humans ought to realize again that they are part of a whole, and need to protect, preserve and pass on the natural reserves to future generations. For the pope, everything comes together and stands in a mutually reinforcing connection: care for the planet, human happiness, and the economy are all aspects of humankind's participation in an 'integral ecology'.

It is perhaps expressive of a deep understanding of the signs of our times that the pope is not just a prophet of doom, but is inviting us to dream. In a deep way, dreams represent the hopes and expectations of all those who are victims and all those who want things to be different. Contrary to the lyrics of a song by a popular Dutch singer, dreams are not deceptions but rather inspirational incentives to realize the good. In the line of such leadership, theology can be both an ancient and a relevant voice in the contemporary discourse on the Anthropocene and the climate crisis. Ideally, a keen *understanding of society* is rooted in a profound vision on human life as part of creation.

A PHILOSOPHY OF

HUMANITY LOST

Martine Prange

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS

During the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, in the fall of 2016, I saw a film by the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter.¹ The film, entitled *Homo Sapiens*, lasted for one-and-a-half hour, and during its first thirty minutes I hadn't a clue about what I was watching: A pigeon flew through an empty church; The sea ebbed and flowed and ebbed again on a deserted beach where a rusting roller coaster stood in the water; A worn and crooked door in an old theater squeaked as it swung in the draft; The wind lifted a plastic bag in an old operating room in a hospital, flung it back to the ground and lifted it up again.

1 For the trailer see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PANKPUVSzPY&t=29s&ab.channel=IDFAU>

Frankly, I was bored, and wondered where this was going. My first intuition was to think of the movie as tedious, as apparently, nothing was happening. Then the penny dropped, and I realized I was watching a brilliant documentary displaying the earth after humanity will, by its own doing, have vanished from it. Not just the absence of humans was striking, but the insight that together with humanity, time and purposefulness will also disappear. Nothing will happen and at the same time everything will be repeated endlessly. Perhaps one day a dove will fly through an empty church, a paper bag will blow through an abandoned building, and it will ebb and flow and ebb again on the beaches. That's about it.

We are currently dealing not only with familiar crises like wars, refugees, poverty, and hunger, but also with a new crisis, which gives us a brand-new sense of unease: the climate crisis. Of course, we have long known the environment is threatened and we are aware that we need to be economical with energy. New is the fact that environmental pollution has led to a global crisis, which not only threatens nature but also the continued existence of the human race. This unique prospect, in human history and the history of Earth, catapults us back to key philosophical questions, such as 'what is a human being?' and 'what does it mean to be human?'. There are, in fact, three developments that make it necessary to revisit these questions.

Robotization – Especially the latest development, in which attempts are underway to make robots as human-like as possible by endowing them with emotions as well as with intelligence. This once again confronts us with the question what makes human beings 'human'. Can robots ever become 'human'?

Transhumanism – This movement advocates 'human enhancement' by way of technological interventions, such as 'design babies', or pimping not only one's appearance (who doesn't want to look like Tom Cruise or Scarlett Johansson?), but also one's IQ and talents through the use of genetic engineering.² Again the question is, is the resulting 'perfect human' still a human being? Or are they 'super-human', and are human beings indeed nothing but a bridge

2 Compare N. Bostrom & R. Roache, 'Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement', in J. Ryberg, T. Petersen & C. Wolf (ed.), *New Waves in Applied Ethics*, Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 120-152.

between animal and the *Ueberschensch*, as described by Friedrich Nietzsche in his poetic work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*?³ In that book, Nietzsche incidentally jotted down that the *Ueberschensch* would laugh as hard at human beings as human beings now laugh about the behavior of monkeys.

The Anthropocene – Humanity has become the main geological force and has exerted its *hubris*, not only with regard to God, as Nietzsche proclaimed in the famous ‘Death of God’ parable in *The Gay Science*, but also to the Earth and itself.⁴ Indeed, humankind is in danger of being erased from the face of the earth like ‘a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea’, as Michel Foucault wrote in the conclusion to his impenetrable masterpiece *The Order of Things*.⁵

It reminds us of the familiar riddle with which the Sphinx of Thebes challenged Oedipus: ‘what walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening?’ Oedipus’s answer, defeating the Sphinx and winning the right to marry the queen of Thebes Iokaste, who was also secretly his mother, sounded: the human being. If we are not careful there will soon be a long, silent, dark night, in which there will be no more walking on the earth at all, at least not by humans.

This is an unprecedented situation. For centuries, Western and Eastern philosophies have focused on accepting mortality as one of the most important tasks of human life. But this was an individual task, an ethic that revolved around acceptance and modesty, as expressed by the inscription on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi: γνῶθι σεαυτόν, or ‘know thyself’. This utterance was no modern, neoliberal self-centered saying, rather it meant: know your place, you small, powerless and ignorant human being, know that you aren’t divine; you are only mortal, only human. It warned against the *hubris* of the ego and its narcissistic tendency to try and inflate itself to divine proportions.

3 F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Edited by A. del Caro and R. Pippin. Translated by A. del Caro, Cambridge-New York-Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 7.

4 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Edited by B. Williams and Translated by J. Nauckhoff and A. del Caro. Cambridge-New York-Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 119-120.

5 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, London-New York: Routledge Classics, 2002, p. 422.

While the warning ‘know thyself’ may have worked in Ancient Greece, the modern Enlightened person is no longer deterred by such ancient wisdom. Over the period of about two hundred years, humankind has, with unprecedented vigor, not only expanded to more than eight billion earthlings, it has also depleted the globe to the point where its own survival as a species and that of the planet itself are at stake. Philosophically, this confronts us with a new and fundamental task. As it no longer suffices to reflect on our own individual mortality, we must now learn to cope with the idea of the disappearance of humanity as a species.

To help avoid this extinction, we need to rethink the relationship between earth, nature and humankind, starting from the question ‘what do we leave behind?’. One way to approach this is to return to the holistic views of Alexander von Humboldt. On his travels to South America, this Romantic philosopher, natural scientist and explorer, the younger brother of *Bildung*-philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, developed ideas quite opposed to Enlightenment philosophers who placed humanity above nature and encouraged human beings to exploit and suppress nature through knowledge, science and technology. Instead he developed an ecology in which humans are an integral part of nature.

My theory of lost humanity combines Humboldt’s holistic way of thinking with input from three other sources: Western existentialist philosophy and Eastern Buddhist philosophy, which give primacy to ‘being’ over ‘having’; then also Rosi Braidotti’s critical post-humanism, which advocates egalitarianism and the interconnectedness of all life;⁶ and third, I refer to Judith Butler’s phenomenological ethics, which revolves around the ideas of ‘precarious’ and ‘grievable’ life.⁷ What life do we consider worth preserving? Together, this leads to what can tentatively be called an ‘ethics of nurturing’.

Using these sources, my proposal is to develop an ‘anthropology of lost humanity’, an anthropology that asks the double question: what are humans without the earth? And what meaning will the earth still have if it conti-

6 R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

7 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*. London-New York: Verso, 2004, and Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London-New York: Verso, 2009.

nues without our presence? What will we leave behind when we have actually disappeared? For well over two hundred years, humankind's relationship with the earth as its habitat has been an abusive one. This relationship requires a profound transformation, based on the concepts of connectedness, i.e., the understanding that everything is connected to everything else through relationships of mutual influence and ripple effects. It requires an attitude of nurturing, from the understanding that all that lives are equal and vulnerable.

I just mentioned Nietzsche's book *The Gay Science*, whose title seems rather paradoxical. After all, philosophy and science often do not have a cheerful message – of course exceptions occur, like the recent and unexpected discovery of a Roman temple city near Zevenaar. As philosophy and science focus on mapping the boundaries of human knowledge and action, they must thus name impossibilities as well as possibilities. Moreover, while they apply a discourse of truth and meaning, scientists also are aware of the importance of probability and interpretation. 'The truth' as such is not very fixed, so we should be careful with big statements. The crises of post-truth and the Anthropocene show how important it is for the university to continue to stand up for science based on truth, soundness, and nuance. It stings our professional honor that in this post-truth era, part of the general public is abusing this caution to cast doubt on the climate crisis.

Critical analysis and interpretation are the primordial tasks of philosophers. But philosophy goes further. It also proposes solutions, as I have tried to demonstrate with my ethics of nurturing as a solution to the anthropology of lost humanity. The development of sensible policies is, after all, based on knowledge, insight, values, and beliefs. We need the law to protect us from ourselves. And we need philosophy, history, and cultural studies to develop alternative concepts, theories, ideas, visions, attitudes, and values to better understand our world and to formulate principles for good policy in politics and law.

In 2019, a few years after *Homo Sapiens*, Geyrhalter made another film, called *Earth*. I would like to conclude my contribution with the short trailer of this film.⁸ This film is not void of human presence, instead it shows how we, human beings, desecrate, excavate, deplete, and bend the earth to our will. The men who perform this work of, literally, ‘moving mountains’ are aware of the greatness of their work. One workman praises the ‘virginity’ of the mountain, as it has never before been touched by a human being (which touches upon another urgent problem, the fact that men are once again increasingly appropriating the right to act as judge and owner of the female body). Another workman, by contrast, acknowledges that this work creates an ecological disaster, when he laments that ‘humankind learns nothing from its history or from anything else’.

8 For the trailer see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RQ3yFmDz-E&ab_channel=Geyrhalterfilm.

ASKING QUESTIONS

ABOUT THE LANGUAGE

IN WHICH WE ASK OUR

QUESTIONS

Ernst Hirsch Ballin

I

Jurisprudence and theology have more in common than many researchers are aware. Both disciplines deal with texts with a meaning and significance that are richer, and more open to future contexts of understanding, than what their authors had intended. Institutions belong to the lingually expressed conditions of our lives, including such venerable institutions as universities and their faculties. Institutions are created, they may perish or be abolished, or they can merge with other institutions, in which they do not 'die' but live on under a different name.

The latter is applicable here. For, this symposium has been organized on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, established under a dual legal regime of canonical and Dutch law. While TST enthusiastically presents itself as the university's youngest school, this can also be looked at from another angle. This School resulted, in 2007, from a merger between Tilburg University (legally the *Katholieke Universiteit Brabant*), which before had merged with the *Theologische Faculteit Tilburg* (itself the result of mergers), and the *Katholieke Theologische Universiteit* (KTU). The KTU had its seat in Utrecht, which nowadays hosts one of the two locations of the Tilburg School of Theology.

In 1991, the KTU was itself the result of a merger between two institutions: the *Katholieke Theologische Universiteit Amsterdam* and the *Katholieke Theologische Universiteit Utrecht*. In accordance with the former legal terminology, up to 1986 universities that organized only a limited number of academic disciplines were called 'hogescholen', but this terminological variation had no legal effects. These two small universities themselves were in fact the outcome of a merger in 1967, between several major seminaries for philosophy and theology established by the ecclesiastical authorities. One of the seminaries that was continued in Amsterdam was the major seminary of *Warmond*, founded in 1799 as a replacement for the Northern Netherlands of the Theological faculty of Leuven University. That university was shut down in 1797, following the annexation of the Duchy of Brabant two years earlier, together with the other territories of the Southern Netherlands, by the French Republic.

Following the legal principle that a merged legal entity lives on in its new institutional body, we must therefore conclude, admittedly a little facetiously, but taking history seriously, that the Tilburg School of Theology is not the youngest, but *by far* the oldest School of our university. Hence, it is a pleasure for me to contribute to this celebration of what few people so far have realized is its 225th anniversary.

II

But I will now turn to the field of research at our much younger Law School, established in 1963, starting with two observations. First, somewhat comparable to theological research, legal research manifests itself as ‘a discourse about a discourse’. The meaning of the legal language that we investigate does not remain unchanged while we are researching it. Hence, no legal or other normative text can be applied to real-life situations without interpretation. That means that every time a legal act is pronounced, its words deploy the actual meaning of the act. Contrary to the common belief that the meaning of a phrase will remain constant, the present-day significance may be different – even if just slightly different – from meanings previously attributed to it. Assigning meaning to the words in a legal rule is thus a continuing process. Seyla Benhabib, following Jacques Derrida, has called this a process of ‘iterations’. Although rules are designed for repeated application, the situation in which such applications take place is never the same.

The second observation concerns the origin of law. Law is no longer imposed on legal subjects because they are subject to the will of the ruler, but it is decided on behalf of the subjects themselves, or rather by their representatives, in constitutional procedures that we call democratic decision-making. This reflects the actual power distribution in a political system, which is based on the principle of equality, even if it is far from realizing perfect equality between all human beings.

III

The function of critical legal research in this setting is to uncover the structure, concepts and connectors of legal language. The grammar of legal language in modern societies is genealogically determined by its common origin from Roman law and is interintelligible across various natural languages. Expressions that appear to be the same across natural languages and across eras in history are subject to variations and mutations. These variations and mutations are related to underlying social, economic and – with respect to the distribution of power – political mutations.

The distinction between *persona* (person) and *res* (thing), for instance, is one of the most elementary features of the language of law. Property and contract presuppose these categories. But notwithstanding the singularity of its historical origin in Roman law, the concept of ‘person’ has not remained unchanged, nor is it at present the same everywhere in the world. In Roman law, being recognized as a person in law was limited to free, not-enslaved male human beings.¹ Nowadays, the definition of a ‘person’ is in principle defined by the recognition of fundamental rights from which no subject may be excluded, although pervasive differences in effective protection subsist.

This view is rooted in the recognition of human dignity as an inherent quality of every human being. As a person, every human being is entitled also to be recognized as a citizen, with ensuing rights to vote and co-decide on the future of the communities to which he or she belongs. Citizens of a state have more political power than ‘foreigners’ or ‘illegal’ migrants. Such legal distinctions reveal underlying, often conflicting power dynamics.

IV

I will now briefly elaborate on the mutations of personhood, because these changing notions exemplify just inasmuch the language of legal research is not ‘innocent’. One of the most important implications of the emergence of human rights is the rejection of reducing personhood to economic actorness, as in Roman law, and of limiting constitutional entitlements to a class of distinguished male citizens. However, Roman law was created in a completely different constitutional and political context, one which was neither democratic nor guided by the principles of what we call in Dutch the *Rechtsstaat*, the rule of law, a concept problematized by Han Somsen in this volume. The grammar of legal systems that resulted from the ancient systematization of Roman law is based on a few core concepts that are on the spectrum of the subject-object distinction and connection.

¹ On categorizations in law and legal research, see more extensively Ernst Hirsch Ballin, *Advanced Introduction to Legal Research Methods*, Cheltenham / Northampton MA: Edward Elgar 2020, chapters two and five.

The concept of person is therefore limited to a certain category of subjects: those endowed with a will. That is why legal grammar is structured around specifications, extensions and reductions of personhood (such as the inclusion of associations and states as legal persons, and the exclusion of or limitations applied to minors and enslaved people) and a range of connectors (such as ownership, will, causation, liability and authority) with other subjects, and other living and dead beings.

V

All of the above is increasingly significant today, in the Anthropocene, which is hollowing out the human-in-world template of legal grammar. In legal relations, personality means ‘presence’, as it is the condition of things to not be present or represented, but only owned, and this condition applies to animals and other parts of living nature. However, as Roberto Esposito puts it, ‘[a]nthropological studies tell a different story, one set in societies where people and things form part of the same horizon, where they not only interact but actually complement each other’.² This is being reinforced by the view that, in the Anthropocene, humans and all other forms of animated life are irreversibly interdependent. They are embedded in ‘Mother Earth’, as it is said in the theological contribution here, and as it is understood in Andean traditions. The earth has moved from being the place of expanding human exploitation to being an entangled system that suffocates aspirations to take control of the future of humankind. At various occasions, other contributors to this symposium have spoken of the need to decentre the human, or even of dethroning man. Today, such ‘post-anthropocentric’ approaches allow the legal imagination to endorse the possibility of legal personality for non-human entities, such as animals, rivers and ecosystems. With a view to providing protection, these views have already reached the domain of international law, a domain that until recently was entirely defined along state-centred lines of thinking.³

2 R. Esposito, *Le persone e le cose*, Turin: Einaudi, 2014, e-book loc. 33; R. Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*, Translated by Z. Hanafi, Polity Books, 2015, p. 3.

3 C. Brölmann & J. Nijman, ‘Personality’, in J. d’Aspremont & S. Singh (ed.), *Concepts for International Law: Contributions to Disciplinary Thought*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019, p. 678–90, there p. 684, 688.

Though such steps towards redefining legal subjectivity beyond humanity are still maturing, they shed a new light on the inclusive/exclusive ambiguity that is inherent in the categorizations of the grammar of law.

VI

The developments I have come to describe concern the language in which we ask questions as legal researchers. These questions take a specific form in comparative law, the subdiscipline devoted to legal research on differences and concordance between different legal systems. As said, the language of law, with its own categories and connectors, is always expressed using a natural language. Comparative law, that compares law in more or less similar legal systems, is relevant because the underlying differences are smaller, whereas more distant comparisons across legal cultures are much more challenging and therefore more revealing.⁴ Traditionally, comparative law was almost exclusively concerned with legal systems that we thought we could understand, especially those of France and Germany, which had strongly influenced ours. Increasingly, comparative law was complemented with common law – the increasingly influential Anglo-Saxon alternative – and up to 1989 with that of the communist states of the time as a contrast experience.

If the same terms were in use – the terminology of Roman law continued to be an obvious point of reference in most legal systems – it was easily assumed that they also meant the same thing. It was hardly recognized that the social, economic and cultural context led to concepts acquiring different meanings, to the extent that they could not be simply equated with each other. Only when a hermeneutical approach gained acceptance, insight grew into the contextual situatedness of terms that had prematurely been regarded as simple translations with the same meaning. This is one of the hurdles that usually have to be overcome when scholars endeavour to make comparisons between different legal systems.

4 R. Sacco & P. Rossi, *Einführung in die Rechtsvergleichung*, 3rd edition, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017.

Comparative law must investigate these deeper layers of legal linguality, which is only possible through advanced interlingual semantic research. Unavoidably, it makes a difference in which language we ask questions. In that regard, the Anglo-Saxon mono-linguality of most of current Dutch academic research is a problem, as it hampers both the methodological approach in our research and the understanding of its object.

EPILOGUE

PERHAPS EVEN THE ANSWER SHOULD

BE A QUESTION

Wim van de Donk

In his contribution to the symposium that produced this little book and that was a simultaneously intellectual and festive celebration of our School of Catholic Theology's fifteenth anniversary – although attentive readers will have noticed that, if we accept Ernst Hirsch Ballin's calculation, we should in fact speak of its 225th anniversary –, one of the speakers was painstakingly clear about the urgency of taking the art of asking questions very seriously in our teaching. In fact, Han Somsen states that 'we are all teaching our students stuff that no longer fits the pressing needs of our times'.

I fear that this might be true to a greater degree than is admitted and recognized in our academic community, and this book may help change that. Many of the contributions in this volume – and Martine Prange's and Ernst Hirsch Ballin's very intensely indeed – provide us with good reasons to pay serious heed to the theologians' 'call to questioning'. Well-known templates and theories of

‘science-as-usual’ are today being fundamentally challenged, and during our discussions someone rightly warned that ‘Feyerabend is always around the corner’. Many of our courses and textbooks are lagging behind, and the same might well be true for the ways in which we assess and report on the ‘quality’ of our academic programs.

All of this can indeed be problematic. Not that it is wrong to teach practical solutions for the demands of a certain time and age – a dentist naturally must be familiar with new materials to fill cavities, and a lawyer should of course be able to apply elements of European or administrative law. But viewed at a more profound level, the habit of teaching answers seriously denies and undermines the very idea of a university, which should be an institution better equipped to ask new questions than to provide, repeat and train well-known answers. Even if the various schools of our universities educate practitioners, our academically trained practitioners should at least be *sui generis*.

To use Donald Schön’s definition in his eponymous book, we should educate ‘reflective practitioners’, trained academics who are able to reflect on both the questions they ask and the answers they propose. In particular, they should have the capability to reflect explicitly on the concepts and contexts that feed, form and fuel the questions they ask. Current and increased complexities and interdependencies are more than sufficient reason to invest further in this kind of authentic academic thinking and questioning.

This symposium was an urgent call to take academic responsibility seriously. Even if well-trained academics are sensitive to the fact that concepts and contexts may also be restrictive frames and tunnel visions, it happens that schools and departments that are devoted to one or more disciplines limit rather than foster curiosity. There is a pun in Dutch on the word for sciences, ‘wetenschappen’, which can be read as neatly putting different kinds of knowledge (‘weten’) in separate shelves (‘schappen’).

Such scientific balkanization is problematic, both from an academic and from a societal perspective. It is problematic for scholars, as the history of scientific progress reveals that many new insights grew precisely from cross-border

curiosity, not to mention the role of serendipity. It is also problematic from a societal perspective, because many of the current and major challenges that humanity is facing in its struggle for survival are utterly complex and cannot be tackled from one angle alone. Most of the tasks that lie before us are multi-problems, related to the discovery of often yet ‘unknown’ interdependencies. Even if we do not worry about nature, and think that it will revive and survive, the fact that our species – alleged to be *homo ‘sapiens’* (sic!) – seems to have endangered itself calls for a broad perspective that connects the various academic fields.

That said, the habitus of really and courageously raising questions cannot abide the idea that these questions might be limited a priori by the availability of data that is needed to seek answers, or indeed by the comfort zones of existing academic narratives, fields of study, or theories. However important it may be to follow current standards and protocols in a certain field, this should never blind us to new perspectives. It is perhaps more important to have confidence in scholarly imagination than to trust procedures. Interschool and interdisciplinary occasions, of which this symposium was a short but excellent and promising example, are an invitation to foster such irregular and uncharted strands of imagination. Not so much because they offer answers, but because they provoke intriguing questions. This epilogue can therefore only hope to be a prologue.

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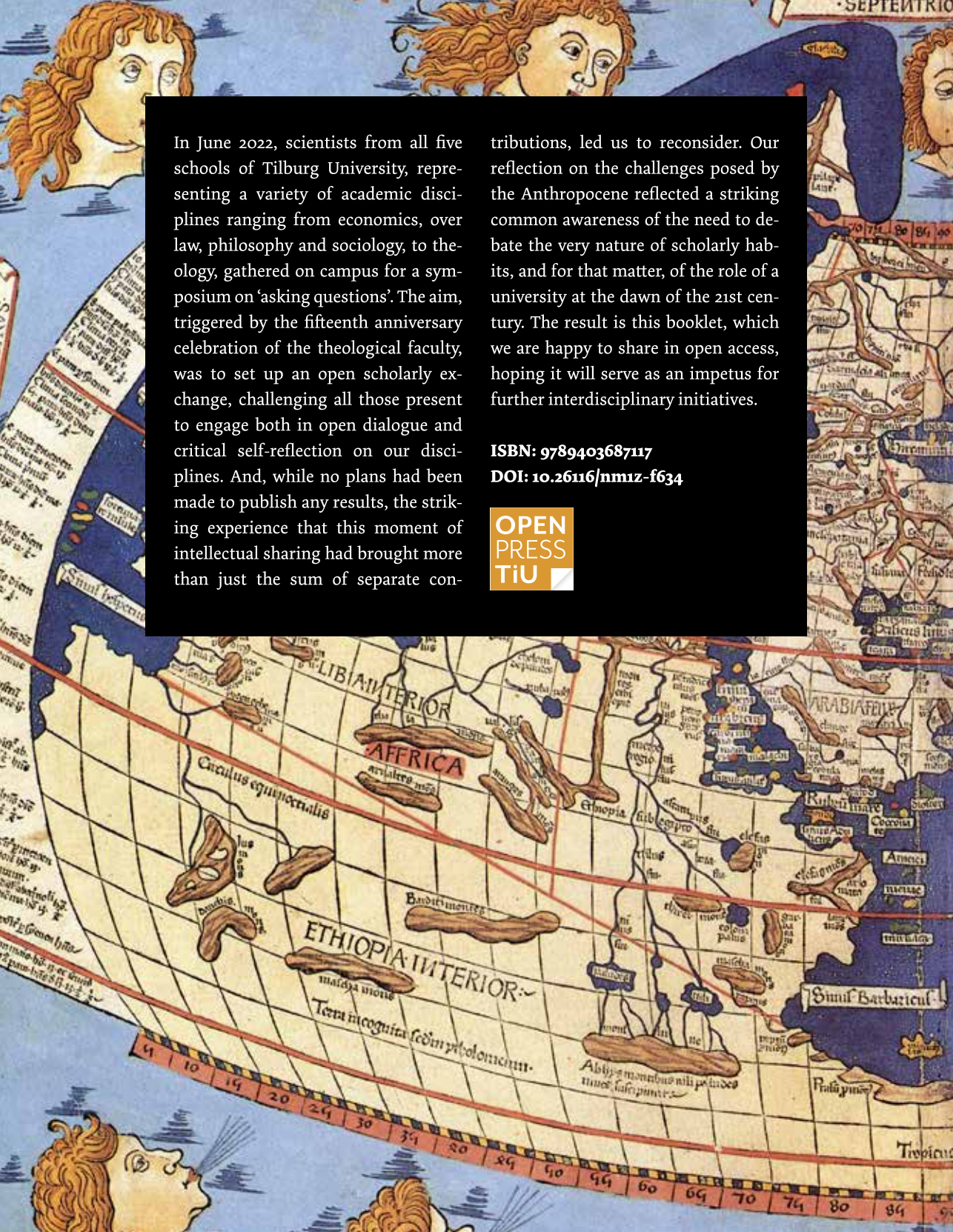
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Tilburg, 2022





In June 2022, scientists from all five schools of Tilburg University, representing a variety of academic disciplines ranging from economics, over law, philosophy and sociology, to theology, gathered on campus for a symposium on 'asking questions'. The aim, triggered by the fifteenth anniversary celebration of the theological faculty, was to set up an open scholarly exchange, challenging all those present to engage both in open dialogue and critical self-reflection on our disciplines. And, while no plans had been made to publish any results, the striking experience that this moment of intellectual sharing had brought more than just the sum of separate con-

tributions, led us to reconsider. Our reflection on the challenges posed by the Anthropocene reflected a striking common awareness of the need to debate the very nature of scholarly habits, and for that matter, of the role of a university at the dawn of the 21st century. The result is this booklet, which we are happy to share in open access, hoping it will serve as an impetus for further interdisciplinary initiatives.

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