This Strange Being Called the Cosmos

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Abstract

This supplementary essay aims to respond to and clarify the misunderstandings concerning the concept of cosmotechnics, the ambiguities of the term cosmos arisen in the article “For a Cosmotechnical Event,” as well as the reason for the neologism of cosmotechnics.

Keywords Cosmotechnics · Cosmology · Unknown · Other beginnings · Philosophy of technology

During a recent dinner with two very respectable scientists, a neuroscientist and a virologist, I initiated a discussion on intuition when we came across the subject of Antonio Damasio’s theory of emotion. What is intuition, the virologist asked me. I replied: the wholeness of perception not yet fully categorized while being pregnant with meanings beyond the normalization of the understanding. The neuroscientist came in and said: you mean irrational. From the perspective of a neuroscientist, intuition, which occupies the highest position for philosophers such as Benedetto Croce and Henri Bergson, is considered an irrational faculty of the spirit; it has to be corrected by reason. In this case a definition of rationality is already assumed even before the conversation could start. However, on what ground could we say that intuition is irrational, and on what ground can we defend that it is not irrational? It might be more the case that the term “rational”, although used widely, hasn’t yet attained its clarity. Because one tends to easily ignore the tension between the categorization of the concept and the dynamic of the concept itself, a difference fundamental to idealist philosophy, such as Schelling and Hegel’s.

The same applies when we talk about indigenous cosmologies: can we say that they are irrational and superstitious because they are archaic and incompatible with modern astral physics? It could be the case if we looked at it from the history of Western science from Ptolemy to Einstein, which could be read as a timeline of ruptures, which also defines the form and spirit of science. When we see the cosmos from the perspective of astral physics, it holds no accounts for either spiritual life or the complex relations between humans and non-humans in cosmologies, which are also the foundation of morality. It is because

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science is one language game, but there are others as well. Each language game is defined from a point of view and by a set of rules, which in turn determines what is rational and what is irrational for it. I would like to point to the word “perspective” or “point of view” here, and its relation to rationality. The way the term “rational” is used today is very much limited to a specific point of view and to a particular language game, and therefore it is not yet rational enough. Rationality should be understood here, not as one form of logical thinking, but the capacity to rationalize, even of that which is excluded by logical thinking, for example the *unground*, seen from other perspectives. That is to say, it defines another language game. This serves as the beginning of the search for the other beginning of thinking, a task that predominates in the late thought of Martin Heidegger.

It is only by recognizing this ‘beginning of the beginning’ that we can now attempt to address directly the question of the cosmos. We may say that there are two kinds of unknowns pertaining to the cosmos: firstly a *known unknown*, that which we don’t know *now* but will know one day when a more advanced techno-scientific condition is met, for example with respect to the astrophysical secrets of the cosmos, dark matter, etc.; secondly an *unknown unknown*, which can never be exhausted and whose objective existence has crucial value, for it is the ground of the moral order that maintains human and non-human relations. The *unknown unknown* may immediately be seen as a call to go back to all forms of obscurantism, which fuse Gaia with new age practices, and imagines that a Mother Earth will come one day and take back all that belongs to her. However, this is not what cosmotechnics is aiming for. Cosmotechnical thinking is a way of rationalization but not mystification; this rationalization is not only a theoretical justification, but also one that is embodied in the technical activities which mediate and concretize human and non-human relations.

This is also why I claim in *The Question Concerning Technology in China. An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, that all cosmo-logies are always cosmo-technics.¹ Cosmology never existed as a pure theory, it was always already rationalized technical being in the world, partially determined both by geographicality and historicity. The *unknown unknown* is mystical, but not mysterious or mythological; and by mystical (as Wittgenstein would call it) or enigmatic (as Adorno would prefer calling it), we mean something that cannot be entirely grasped and demonstrated objectively. I assume here is the possible contribution of anthropology and art today, if we agree with Heidegger that Western philosophy being already completed by cybernetics. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson calls for inventing machines that triumph mechanism, so that “mechanism should mean mysticism.”² Bergson does not mean that the machine will be able to become a fortune-teller or a communicator with the spirits, but rather that these machines are to be situated in a broader reality, a bigger ‘soul’.

This seemingly mystical notion could be rationalized in many ways, and that is what we can learn from various disciplines. For example, the “ontological turn” in anthropology is a call to reconsider the concept of nature and of human and non-human relations; it is an attempt to look for other ontological dispositions in non-European and non-Modern cultures, for example, animism, analogism, totemism, and what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has called Amerindian perspectivism. This does not mean that in the case of perspectivism,

¹ See Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China. An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016/2019).

² Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans R. Ashley Audra and Cloudeley Brereton, with W. Horsfall Carter (London: Macmillan, 1935), 268.

one is going to force oneself to see an iPad or a robot as something capable of exchanging perspectives with a human being. Rather, cosmology, and its epistemology and ontology that one could identify, could be inspirations for other understandings and even reinventions of cosmotechnics. This detour of stepping back in order to move on is a puzzle for many, and that is the reason for which the “how” questions are more often heard than the “why” question, since the necessity is already recognized.

I want to give an example to start with. When we look into Chinese medicine, we will immediately find out that its vocabularies are identifiable with those of Chinese cosmology, for example, Yin and Yang, the five movements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth), *ch'i* (breath, literally: gas), etc. The human body is conceived as a microcosm, which mirrors the macrocosm. One could say that it has no scientific ground since when a Chinese medical doctor is asked by, let's say, a Marxian materialist to show *ch'i* and *yin yang*, he or she would fail to demonstrate it as a material being, like blood or nerves; at the same time, Chinese medicine is an “empirical science,” which has lasted and functioned satisfyingly for thousand years and is still progressing today. It is only an example from which we can see that the dichotomy between modern and traditional cannot be easily resolved solely by the measurement of efficiency and the domination of particular epistemologies. However, it will be too easy to call Chinese medicine a sinocentric or ethnocentric technics, it might be true that it means so for the nationalists, but in reality it is knowledge that is in principle accessible to everyone and could be practiced by everyone.

If Western philosophy and metaphysics has been completed by modern technology, then this new beginning of thinking must be plural; in the sense that it cannot be only a return to the Greeks as Heidegger tried to do on his part. I am convinced that these other beginnings shouldn't not be a return to a vitalism against machines, but rather they should have technology as their primary object of inquiry and dialogue. Heidegger, of course, had good reasons to go back to the Greeks because this other beginning has its originating possibility in the question of Being, which was developed into metaphysics as the question of beings/beingness, yet remains unexhausted by the latter. The history of Western metaphysics is tantamount to the history of technology. Now this technological condition is already far beyond the territory of Europe and its control, as Heidegger himself has already witnessed the planetarization of European technology. If during the Weimar period, the reactionaries, and later the Nazis were able to promise a reconciliation between romanticism and industrialism, nature and steel, it was because this conflict emerged from Europe itself, while the 9/11 event signalled that the enemy is no longer from within, and that a unilateral globalization from the West to the East is in danger.

The planetarization of technology means for Heidegger a generalized loss of sense making [*Besinnungslosigkeit*], as well as an epoch without question [*Fraglosigkeit*]; or in other words, it imposes a numbness, which prevents humans from sensing beyond the realm of scientific and technological rationality. How are non-Europeans going to deal with this numbness? Should they follow Heidegger in going back to the Greeks, identifying the Greeks as their common cultural origin and assuming that all technologies derive from Greek *technē*? This would be no less than another *Besinnungslosigkeit* and cosmotechnics precisely takes its departure from this blind spot of contemporary Western philosophy.

The planetarization of technology imposes a planetary condition for thinking, which prevents us from returning to any abstract and romantic idea of nature and even of the earth. This also constitutes my theoretical difference with respect to the anthropologists of nature (such as Descola and Viveiros de Castro) as well as the ecological cliché to ‘protect nature’. It does not mean that one should not care about the “environment,” on the contrary, this is an imperative; however, the *priority* should be to transform industrial technology

instead of only mitigating and repairing its damage. And it is also the question of nature that brings us back to the final remark on the earth. We have to bear in mind that the earth, which we now call the planet, is not the planet, which was called the earth. The phrase “something strange is the soul on the earth” [*Es ist die Seele ein Fremdes auf Erden*] of the Austrian poet Georg Trakl is not a gnostic outcry, but rather one becomes a stranger to this “earth-planet.” A stranger is one who doesn’t have belongingness to the earth; what he or she experiences is the melancholia of a permanent loss of one’s home and the unfulfilled desire to search for the *place*. Very often the planet prevents us from seeing the earth, like we no longer see the soil under our feet; and while rooting on the earth one often overlooks the planet of which we are part. In the twentieth century, the earth has been conceived as a planet with a rather different meaning as it had before, this was first mediated by the images taken from the moon, and this was the first time human beings truly theorized the earth as a planet. When Heidegger looked at the NASA images of the earth seen from the moon in 1966, he was convinced that these images confirmed his own thesis on the planetary. The planetary is another name for metaphysics. This is also the reason why the cybernetization of the earth, for instance through what James Lovelock has done in the name of Gaia, by describing it as a cybernetic homeostatic system, is another confirmation of what Heidegger calls the completion or the end of metaphysics. This gigantic system functions as a spaceship, as Buckminster Fuller has described it, and as recently demonstrated in the sci-fi movie *The Wandering Earth* (2019).

From an anthropological point of view, there is still much more to say about cosmotechnics, including both its systematic reconstructions and its implications today. From a philosophical point of view, it also conceals the possibility of a radical opening to the beginnings of thinking. I call this multiple opening process “fragmentation” in contradistinction to what Stiegler called bifurcation.³ It is not only because bifurcation remains a biological metaphor, but also, more strangely, because Stiegler’s use of it comes from a beautiful misunderstanding of the use of this term by Alfred North Whitehead, for whom bifurcation is a characteristic of modernity, meaning of dualist thinking, which has yet to be overcome. This fragmentation has its leverage in “culture,” but one shouldn’t immediately equate this with “nation” or the *Volk* such as it has been done since Herder and as it is now closely associated with nationalism. It is the particular sensibility toward the cosmos that defines the way of living and the sense of belonging, and reciprocally so. However, this education of sensibility that Schiller once proposed as an overcoming of the duality between the laws of nature and desire as well as the state and freedom, is rendered ineffective when materialism in the form of political economy triumphed and dominated world history and when nation states manifest itself as the sole force of effective mobilization in geopolitics.

Bernard Stiegler suggests turning the question of thinking [*penser*] into the question of caring [*panser*]. This *différance par excellence* also opens a new space for thinking, not only as one which looks for the other beginning, but also that which has the responsibility to take care of the catastrophe and the aftermaths of metaphysics. Here lies fundamentally the question of courage, the courage to truth and the courage of endurance. Thinking must dare to think in view of the difficulties and limits it has to confront: an almost impossible task to overcome the gigantic force called metaphysics. It is a task that demands imagination and creativity. The fact that the military expansion and economic competition in the twentieth century restricted human intellectual

³ See Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019), see also Yuk Hui, “Machine and Ecology,” *Angelaki*, vol.25 no.4.

activities to the “useful” domains has imposed obstacles for thinking itself. Thinking lingers between the need to demonstrate its economic and pragmatic value and the melancholia of an impossible return. Therefore thinking had to take a detour by going back to the *Heimat* in order to resolve its own dilemma (self-justification and self-position), while such detour sowed also the seeds of fascism and reactionary thinking. Heidegger’s *Erörterung* was such an attempt but fell prey to the lure of National Socialism. In *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, I described this dilemma of “home coming” and its expressions in Heidegger, Keiji Nishitani and Aleksander Dugin; this analysis was continued in a series of essays engaging with Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, Peter Thiel and others, starting with “On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries” published in 2017 and more recently “One Hundred Years of Crisis” in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴ It is not my intention to repeat what has been said there, but I simply want to emphasize that it is necessary to re-examine those easy oppositions set in modern political philosophy and to build a new theoretical apparatus instead of subordinating the latter to these problematic oppositions.

During the pandemic, more than ever, we encounter the oppositions between global and local, East and West, modernity and tradition, cosmopolitanism and nationalism or racism, and the question of “culture,” and of “nation” came back to the fore. What could be the role of philosophy after its own completion? Should philosophy become a discipline concerning merely of ethics: AI ethics, robot ethics, bioethics, medical ethics, etc. For sure, ethical issues are important, but it also limits philosophy from its self-realization and searching for other beginnings. The concept of cosmotechnics was meant to be a response to Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” (1949/1953), as well as a response to his political orientation coming out of his critique of modernity and the desire of “home coming.” Cosmotechnics is not a beginning, but rather a *call* for the other beginning, or rather other beginnings in the plural, however the voice is covered over by the national anthems promoting an economic recovery and the propaganda of the so called “revenge consumption”—the desire to consume takes a revenge after its repression by the corona pandemic (since many luxury shops had been closed). The pandemic may also be the most tempting moment to carry out further cosmotechnical thinking and its realization, to overcome the oppositions (the condition of dialectics) by identifying the multiplicity of the third, be it tragist, daoist or any other names.⁵ This call is not for announcing the end of metaphysics because it has been heard since centuries, but rather a call for the transformation of metaphysics as the possibility of the impossible within thinking itself. This is what I term a ‘cosmotechnical event’.

Thus are my responses to the friendly comments from Frédéric Neyrat and Andres Vaccari.

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⁴ See Yuk Hui, “On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries,” E-flux #81, April 2017; “Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics,” E-flux #86, November 2017; “What Begins after the End of the Enlightenment,” E-flux #96, January 2019; “One Hundred Years of Crisis,” E-flux #108, April 2020.

⁵ This is the task of my forthcoming book, Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 2021).

in periodicals such as *Research in Phenomenology*, *Philosophy Today*, *Metaphilosophy*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Angelaki*, *Cahiers Simondon*, *Derrida Today*, *Techné*, *Jahrbuch Technikphilosophie*. He is co-editor of *30 Years after Les Immatériaux: Art, Science and Theory* (2015), and author of *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (2016), *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (2016/2019), *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019) and forthcoming *Art and Cosmotechnics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021). His books have been reviewed and endorsed by *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Jahrbuch Technikphilosophie*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Issues in Science and Technology* among others.