

Topic 4

“We have to entertain the possibility that there is no reason for something existing; or that the split between subject and object is only our name for something equally accidental we call knowledge; or, an even more difficult thought, that while there may be some order to the self and the cosmos, to the microcosm and macrocosm, it is an order that is absolutely indifferent to our existence.”

Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol. 1*, 2011, p. 18.

Humankind and especially philosophers have been obsessed with unanswered questions for millenia, and one stands out in a particular fashion, in that we can comfortably assume only few of us - if not nobody - has never pondered it: Why? Indeed, from as young an age as seven, children already begin burdening their parents with seemingly unending chains of “why...” questions, unending because to every answer, the same question can be presented again: “Why?”. And if one says that all parents aren’t necessarily the best fit to ponder such thoughts, one would surely be quite disappointing when turning to philosophers who have dedicated their lives to searching an answer, as although several propositions emerge (i.E. eudaemonism), they tend to clash with each other without any possible resolve to be foreseen. This has naturally brought some philosophers to put into question whether asking the question in the first place is relevant, thus implying that there might be no available answer, in such a way that pursuing one relentlessly would be doomed to vanity. Amongst these men, we find Eugene Thacker who not only suggests that there might not be any reason to our existence, but furthermore adds that the importance of mankind in the confines of the Universe appears to be severely limited, and sometimes prone to illusions on our behalf. Indeed, he displays the idea that maybe the notion of humans being subject that act upon object by thought lacks in relevancy and that absolutely, the existence of man becomes negligible as soon as the human realm is left, to explore the infinitely small and infinitely large. These ideas are presented in his book *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy* whose title quite accurately describes the sentiment that such a consideration can bring, as more often than not, we desperately try to find meaning in our existence to justify it. Therefore, we shall attempt to study the likelihood of Thacker’s hypothesis in its three components: the vanity of the notion of reason of existence, the lack of knowledge as an absolute and the limit of our influence and thus of any importance in the realm of existence. We will then ask ourselves whether horror is indeed the definite response if such a theory were to be proven undeniable.

Let us begin with the infamous question that began it all: Why do we exist? Or more accurately : Is there a reason why we exist? Such a question is rather tough to tackle and thus let us consider what both answers. Let us surmise that there is in fact a reason to our existence. We will first deal with trivial solutions: on the one hand if the reason to exist is to exist, then it really isn’t really a reason as the reason is both the means and the aim, and on the other hand, if we exist to die, then the reason why we exist is to not exist which is pointless. Now, still considering that we exist for a reason, suppose that someone believes that they exist for a reason and they are right. In such a case, either they don’t manage to fulfill the aim of they’re existence and thus their existence was unreasonable, and they ended up existing for no reason since the expected outcome isn’t fulfilled, or they do manage to live up to the reason of their existence, but then once it is fulfilled, why do they keep on existing? Maybe the reason to existence is continuous, but then why do they die? Thus existing for a known reason poses many problems. On the other hand if one exists for a reason but never gets to know that reason, then the problem of horror is definitely not solved as we lack complete control over the situation (I believe Schopenhauer would have agreed). Of course this particular case

begs to consider religion, the idea that a god or gods have a bigger plan in which we are mere tools to an end we can't fathom, similarly to livestock whose life meaning is completely unknown to them ; but in such case the philosophical horror of admitting a lack of control remains, and can only be dulled by complete belief. Furthermore, it then remains true that asking the question is pointless. In any case, the idea of an answer to the question is available to us seems unlikely. It might be worth noting that it is often the case in practice to find people who desperately believed in what they thought was the reason of their existence that ended up realizing it was not the case. As early as Homere, the *Odyssey* shows Achilles, who was sure the meaning of life was to die a glorious death for your city, beg Ulysses not to do the same from the pits of Ancient Greek's hell.

Now consider, there is no reason to our existence. We should clear such a statement up to make sure there is no confusion as reason can both mean aim and cause. Indeed, the assumption should then be: existence does not hold any aim, but is the result of causes. This hypothesis is similar to what darwinian evolution proposes: for example, polar bears didn't develop warmth retaining fur to be able to withstand the cold of the arctic, they developed it because living in the arctic without it wouldn't have been possible, and thus there would be no polar bears . We are what we are, because if we weren't we wouldn't exist, in the same way that a boy born without a heart doesn't exist not because he had no reason to exist, but because a random set of causes did not lead to him having a heart and thus he does not exist. The point is that it seems less problematic to consider that we exist simply because if we didn't, we would obviously not exist, rather than making the assumption that our existence is already supposed to lead to something we can determine, that our existence is necessarily a future cause.

Once we have considered our existence as aimless, we can simply apply the same logic to the rest of existing things we know of, since of course we would then have ruled out the possibility that they exist for us, as it would beg the question: "Where is the aim in existing for something that has no aim itself?".

Therefore Eugene Thacker seems to be in the right when claiming that the notion that there is no reason for something existing should at the very least be entertained.

Another conception tackled by Thacker in his proposition is that, knowledge, as in the consideration brought upon an object by a subject is purely accidental and that the underlying split between subject and object only comes down to a choice in name. What is implicitly suggested here is that there is no knowledge in essence. Let us examine what this implies. Knowledge is often a cause of pride in mankind , and many people live to learn and amass as much knowledge as possible. However, does knowledge actually exist outside of Human existence? By that we mean to ask ourselves whether there is such a thing as knowledge in essence, independent of mankind.

First let us consider what different types of knowledge there are: we can know of something we sense, in which case the knowledge manifests by the synthesis of what we have sensed. Then we have knowledge derived of language, concepts we don't really sense , such as categories, and interactions/transformations (ie speed, weight, composition,...) and finally larger concepts we will set aside for the moments (freedom, life, god,...).

Concerning objects we have knowledge of through our senses, it seems unavoidable that the knowledge and the objects are different. For example , I might know of a rock but as long as I can't sense its magnetic field, what I know of the rock and what is the rock is different. And as such, knowledge of the rock really depends on the one who derives it (for example, a blind person would have a different knowledge of the same object). However there is an even larger problem with the second type of knowledge that already came into play in our thinking: what makes a rock a rock? It's quite arbitrary to consider naming a rock a rock. Nietzsche in *Truth and lie in an extramoral sense* sheds light on the different arbitrary choices in language. Amongst them, voluntary omission which leads to calling every leaves, leaves, even though every leaf is different to other leaves, and arbitrary classification such as that done for species. The last one leads to an interesting problem in thinking : if we chose the criteria for choosing what animals are mammals, and then say dogs are mammals,

although we technically thought to come up with this deduction, we did not produce any knowledge that isn't dependant on the initial flawed knowledge, and thus knowledge is a closed system. It is the problem with premisses chosen arbitrarily. This leads back to the split between subject and object that is thus purely arbitrary and has no sense outside of Humankind's knowledge. And since Humankind is neither eternal nor uniform, then knowledge as we know it is accidental.

Nevertheless let us address the finally category of knowledge (categories which are ironically also arbitrary) that don't obviously derive from our senses to corroborate our assertion. If knowledge exists in essence, then each piece of knowledge should be unique and universal (no contradictions possible). However, the conceptions freedom, god, life,...definitely change from one person to another and don't remain constant in time. So either there is no such thing as knowledge outside of Humankind's closed system, or the knowledge we have is translated and the difficulties in language then explain how freedom could be several things, but in this case the knowledge that is accessible to us is different from knowledge in essence. In any case, knowledge seems to be indeed accidental for Humankind. This brings added consequences such as likely preventing our amassed knowledge to be worth anything if, or -more likely - as soon as Mankind becomes extinct.

Finally Thacker puts into question the significance of mankind at scales other than that of man. Indeed, an essential component of humans recognized since antiquity is that of humans as technical animals, having an influence on the environment, changing it and moulding it at a bigger scale than any other known lifeforms. However this power over the environment becomes a lot less impressive when it is considered relative to the whole universe: how significant is changing the earth's climate when one takes into consideration all the planets in the universe? How much does building a city affect the abundant space in the universe? To what extent does powering cities worldwide have an influence on the total light travelling the universe? It becomes rather clear that not only does Humanity lack aim, it also lacks the ability to really leave an imprint in the universe. This becomes more transparent when time is taken into account: what little a speck are a few millennia on a timeline! Especially when remembering the universe far precedes us, that there was existence long before we existed and that all we made will likely be wiped out by the Sun's death. This extends to the microscopic world where our beings are unraveled into a arrangements of reactions, phenomena that, even at the scale we can observe, appear to be largely indifferent to man: there is no need for man to have breathing reactions; and where humans hopes to ignite thermonuclear fusion, thermonuclear fusion already happens massively in stars. It seems quite undeniable that mankind barely has a negligible effect outside the confines of its surroundings.

Therefore, it indeed seems that Thacker is right to ask that we entertain these ideas. However, should such a "difficult thought" bring us to bathe in the horror that the title implies to emerge? However encouraging Schopenhauer might be towards death as a solution to the realization of the absolute-wise meaninglessness of our existence, let us consider another option thanks to an analogy used to teach quantum physics to students: imagine a 2-dimensional species, that exists on a plane surface but cannot understand anything to do with depth. If they were to consider a cylinder (a 3-dimensional shape) they might be struck in horror as they cannot not even fathom what such a thing would be, as they can't grasp the concept of a third dimension. However, they can interpret it in the confines of two dimensional space as an object being both a circle and a rectangle at the same time. Although not a perfect representation, it would allow them to deal with the unknowable, whether it concerns something that actually exists (in this case, we three-dimensional beings know it does exist, but they can't) or not. Similarly, we are faced with a system in which we are severely confined: our influence has a very short reach in the immensity of the universe, time and the microverse; our knowledge is dependant on us and thus does not exceed us. We can't really feasibly free ourselves from this system, and so we might as well embrace its limitations rather than desperately grasping onto the notion that we have purpose and importance in an absolute sense. Similar to what Camus, one of the most prominent figures of existentialism, proposed we can choose a reason for our existence, in the confines of our existence, by accepting that we likely cannot find it outside, if there even is one, because of the inherent limitations of our beings. And thus similarly to Sisyphé in Camus'

interpretation, we would indeed be helplessly stuck in our state of unknowingness, but not tormented by it. Indeed, myths often showed the pointlessness and suffering that comes from trying to reach the gods (or the unattainable): Bellerophon fallen and Prometheus sent to rot with mankind in tartarus.

In conclusion, Thacker's plea that we recognize the possibility that we have no reason, that our knowledge does not surpass the inconsistency of Humankind and that ultimately we hardly matter all things considered is quite founded as a response to the relentless problems that emerge otherwise. Furthermore, it seems adopting such an idea does not necessarily entail dread and horror however the realisation itself may be, as long as one is ready to abandon the notion that humans could ultimately be worth more than the theory suggests. This of course is far easier said than done as knowing whether there is a better choice is itself for the moment seemingly unreachable.