

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.

Ever since the beginning of civilization, perhaps even earlier, human beings have tried to justify their existence, to find meaning in their lives. The meaning of life — it is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, riddles of mankind. Solving it would equate to solving everything, for when we are all given an unquestionable purpose, we can put all other questions aside and focus on that very purpose. I agree completely that in order to grasp the truth, we must also grasp the notion that our entire existence, the existence of the cosmos more broadly and the existence of our planet and ourselves more particularly, is a stroke of luck.

Eugene Thacker claims that we must entertain the notion that there is no reason behind existence, meaning we must be ready to accept the possibility that existence itself is meaningless. He claims further that perhaps the distinction between a subject (meaning ourselves) and object (meaning the world around us) is also a complete sham, a human invention called knowledge. This amounts to the claim that while some arbitrary order, some arbitrary structure or goal, does exist, it is one that does not, so to say, play by the rules of our mind; it is an order wholly alien to us, an order that does not take us into account, an order that is indifferent to us.

In this essay I shall first explain how one can come to the conclusion of universal meaninglessness. In the second part, I shall explore human knowledge (which I also refer to as philosophy within the text, for, though they are two different things, they are, in my mind, inseparable and must be treated as such) and how it is accidental. In the third part I shall analyse what is meant by an order in the micro- and macrocosm and how that relates to us. Finally, in the fourth part, I will stress the limits of this kind of thinking and follow it to its logical conclusion.

PART I

The entire purpose of philosophy, from its very inception, is the search for truth. It was born from a sense of wonder at the world and a desire to understand why the universe is so strange and so wondrous, a desire to uncover its concealed workings and, ultimately, to find out what those workings amount to, what their goal is. Since no human has ever been able to grasp the true nature of the cosmos, they ascribed its meaning and its function to some other, higher, more knowledgeable being, whether that be some sort of mystical energy or a god of some sort. After all, they could not even so much as entertain the notion that perhaps there is no great being that legitimizes our lives. Even the most pessimistic or nihilistic ancient texts, such as the book of Ecclesiastes, which at first posits that everything is meaningless, folds in the end and accepts the consensus that it is best to live under God's

laws (even though they may be as meaningless as the setting of the Sun) so as to live a happy and fulfilling life. The next time nihilism was more than a passing thought was in the nineteenth century, in which science and technology had advanced to such a degree so as to render superstition and religion a silly concept. The scientists of that century managed to do what no other person had managed before: they eagerly climbed Mount Olympus and found it empty. Whether they had wanted to or not, they had killed God, to use Nietzsche's expression. The point here is that the incessant human drive to learn and to know, the philosophical drive, is what brought us to the conclusion that we are an insignificant speck in the grand scheme of things and that everything we know might well be an accident. In order to be objective, as the western tradition teaches us, we must not deny any proposition, even a threatening one such as this, until we can comfortably disprove it.

Of course, it is also this very philosophical drive towards knowledge that can posit a counter-question: How exactly do we know that we are right in this conclusion that the universe is meaningless, a mere accident brought about by forces yet unknown? Well, we can't know. A human being is, in many respects, a very limited animal. The secrets of the universe shall forever be shrouded to us for the very reason that we live in this same universe and are forced to live under its limitations. We might very well change course in the future and proclaim that there *is* some sort of meaning to existence, but as it stands, that option seems very unlikely. We may never know the truth, but if we assume, as nearly all western thinkers have so far, that the truth is an absolute good that is worthy of being uncovered, then we must also assume that even a singular, miniscule step towards the truth, no matter how ugly, is better than no truth at all.

PART II

We have concluded that the human drive towards knowledge, philosophy, is what has led us into a crisis of meaning, an instance in which we may be forced to accept that all our efforts were in vain and that there is nothing for us to discover. Let us continue by asking ourselves what knowledge really is and how it is also accidental.

In short, knowledge is our uniquely human way of understanding the universe. Knowledge is accumulated via observation and thinking, it is our interpretation of the world around us. Our minds, that is to say, *we*, are trapped within our mortal and limited bodies. These receive certain physical or chemical stimuli which are then communicated to our brains, to *us*, via electrical signals travelling through our equally fallible nerves. It is finally within our brain that these electrical signals are interpreted and our neurons construct an image of the world as it supposedly is, that is, as far as we can comprehend it. All animals perceive the world in a similar, albeit even more limited and primitive, way, however only us humans are capable of storing all these various stimuli and reconstructing them at a whim, thereby being capable of various advanced functions, such as understanding cause and effect, imagination, prediction and so on. Knowledge is therefore not some divine gift or noble instrument, designed for the advancement of our species, but rather another accident, a by-product of evolutionary development. It is to me unimaginable that something as simple as an amoeba or a squid or a tiger, trying to survive and reproduce, would ever even consider such notions as good and evil, being and nothingness. Concepts such as these are not useful for an animal's ability to

catch food and mate. They are consequences of man's overdeveloped brain and leisure time, when he can apply his sophisticated cerebral cortex to other matters.

It is difficult, or rather, it was difficult in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to think that what separates us human beings from other, less advanced animals is now nothing more than folly. It would be equivalent to a spit in the face to all hitherto philosophy to posit that philosophy itself and our ability to philosophize is nothing more than a mere game, a mere thought exercise, something that we came up with in order to distract ourselves by trying to answer questions that were only thought up by us in the first place. Acknowledging this may as well be a refutation of philosophy, to which one might ask: Then why bother philosophizing about it? The answer is twofold. First, destroying such a pillar of our civilization would throw us into such a moral crisis that the whole of civilization might collapse. The deaths caused and damage done would be immeasurable and might even destroy us as a species. No one, other than perhaps the most depraved among us, would want such a result because we all benefit greatly from society and would suffer in its absence. We are an animal that has invented laws and grown wholly dependent upon them. Removing such laws from our lives would cause our doom. Second, it is precisely this inadequacy within us, the one that wishes to reject philosophy, that must also preserve philosophy, for fear of making yet another inadequate judgement. I shall devote more time to this latter statement in parts three and four.

PART III

What kind of order is there in the micro- and macrocosm? Certainly there is some sort of order, after all, the planets all rotate around a center of gravity, water boils when exposed to heat, our cells reproduce in an almost automaton-like fashion. Clearly, some level of order exists, otherwise the planets would all spin and fly in their own direction, matter would combust and freeze on a whim, and us humans would be subject to many more deformities. The question, however, is not whether or not some level of order exists in the universe, but rather what its purpose is, if it even has any.

Let us take the very simple example of a bird. It wakes up in the morning and flies out in search of food for itself and its younglings. If it catches it, it returns to its nest, feeds itself and its offspring, and then goes back to sleep, recovering its strength for another foray into the wilderness. If it fails to catch any food, it will slowly wither in strength until it collapses and dies. Its nest shall also die and in due time it shall be reduced to fertilizer. Is there any purpose in this life? Is there any higher goal? There is none. The bird's life is a simple struggle for survival, survival being its only aim. There is certainly an order in this life. The bird knows exactly what it must do, whether it realizes this or not. Its movements are ordered, almost mechanical; it does not hesitate in killing its prey, nor does it ever ignore its call to hunt. Whether rain or shine, it will do its preprogrammed duty and it will give its all, despite the fact that it will receive no reward, other than the opportunity to live and hunt another day. It does not distract itself with leisurely activities and it does not occupy its time in thinking about what its purpose could be. We recognize now that the life of a bird is not very meaningful. It has no higher purpose, no beautiful destiny. Why should we think that it is any different with us? We are, after all, cut from the same cloth; all mammals, in fact all living

things on this planet, have a common ancestor. And we are a much younger species when compared to the bird, surely the older living creatures would have found a purpose by now? Life works by its own laws. Whatever the origin or cause of those laws may be is irrelevant. Its aim is to survive long enough to make functioning offspring, nothing more. Humans have been blessed, or cursed, with the awareness of these processes, meanwhile all other living things engage in them unknowingly. But as we have seen, we were never meant to understand these things. The development of our brains for the purposes of survival were so great that we could, by happenstance, understand the course and nature of life as well.

Again, these claims may perhaps seem very alien and revolting to a society that has, through countless generations, bred the concept of the sanctity of life and of the value of knowledge. But a society that loves knowledge, as our western society claims to do, must eventually recognize the idea, if not the fact, that the very knowledge it cherishes is, in reality, meaningless. Knowledge and philosophy, by their very nature and stated purpose, come to undermine themselves, because if nothing is sacred and everything can be analysed to the minutest detail, then knowledge and philosophy are also not sacred and can be analysed, deconstructed, reconstructed and reevaluated in every conceivable way, rendering them just as silly and meaningless as any other object that can be studied. In short, our very knowledge, our comprehension of the world around us, *does not live up to the standards of itself.*

By our best estimations, the universe, as we know it, will end one day. It is an inevitable consequence of its ongoing (and strikingly orderly) expansion that at some point in time, far into the future, the universe will expand so far that its galaxies will be ripped apart, then the planets that constitute those galaxies will be ripped apart; following them, the molecules and atoms that make up those planets will also be ripped apart, and finally the subatomic particles that make up the atoms will be ripped apart until nothing remains but energy. The universe will be a dark sea of heat that will expand ever further and grow ever colder. Whatever the laws that dictate these events are, they were most certainly not made for us or even made by anyone or anything at all. They do not conform to our humanist sensibilities; this humanist idea was, again, a mere product of an accidental knowledge, created by an accidental living thing, created by an accidental accumulation of atoms in a certain pattern.

In this section I must also not fail to mention that what we perceive as order may well be just another figment of our imagination, a desperate concept formulated by our minds in order to protect ourselves, and that there may be something lurking in the dark recesses of the universe that would completely shatter the theory that we have spun around everything. In short, that order is a human concept retroactively applied to a universe that is not very orderly. There is of course the possibility that what we perceive as order is yet another series of coincidences that seem to have something in common but in reality do not.

INTERMISSION

This is, I believe, the horror of philosophy: the idea that it is all for naught, that we cannot know, that we were never meant to know, and that we are an insignificant and unintended species, sitting silently in the universe, awaiting unstoppable oblivion. With his statement, Eugene Thacker harkens back to the work of American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft, who famously created a fictional (but all too real) universe, in which mankind was stuck in the middle of an ancient quarrel between various eldritch deities, each of them as impulsive and meaningless as ourselves. Even the title of his book harkens to one of Lovecraft's sonnets, Nyarlathotep, in which the idiot god in the center of the universe wakes up and blows Earth's dust away.

There is no purpose to humankind in Lovecraft's world. In his universe, Earth was colonized by an old race of creatures who went about experimenting with life and accidentally, even unknowingly, created the first single-cell organisms that eventually evolved into more advanced life. These historical claims are, of course, fictional, but their philosophical character is anything but. Life on Earth was an accident, a series of coincidental events that culminated in the creation of a lifeform, which then, unknowingly and equally accidentally, began to reproduce. We are the very first lifeform on this planet that understands this reality, we are the first to recognize the process of evolution, and the mechanical and chemical functions of our bodies; we understand the food chain and the law of thermodynamics; finally, we understand that our understanding of these concepts is entirely arbitrary and flawed: whether we understood them or not, we would function in much the same way, perhaps better, perhaps worse.

PART IV

But perhaps there is a silver lining to the grim reality of the universe, as we perceive it. In my mind, one of these is certainly *the way we perceive it*. As we have previously concluded, the human senses and the human mind is very fallible, therefore our observations and our conclusions may be fallible as well, including the conclusion that there is no deeper meaning to the universe. As I have previously stated, philosophy undermines itself, negates itself, by its very nature, because it has to take into account that it, too, can be dissected and deemed false. However, this thought process that I used is itself another instance of philosophy, an instance of a human being applying his limited intellectual capacity in an attempt to discover the truth, and as such it may also be negated. We can go even further and negate this negation again and then again and then again to infinity. Our thoughts, in order to be consistent, must take their own fallibility into account; therefore, they must also take the fallibility of their fallibility into account and so on. This brings us to my conclusion: we may be able to know the truth, we may be unable to know the truth, but *we can never definitely know that we know the truth*. We can take this in a negative light, proclaiming that all of our human history and striving for progress is nothing more than folly because we will never reach a conclusion and will ruin ourselves in trying to do so; or we can accept this in a more positive light and sleep soundly, knowing (or at least hoping) that, even if we do not understand it and never will, there is something out there that can be described by our limited languages as a meaning, a goal, a purpose. As stated previously, we are confined by the universe; we cannot see all of it, we cannot see beyond it, and therefore we cannot fully comprehend it.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I shall restate my thoughts.

Firstly, there is a very real possibility that there is no meaning behind anything and that everything was created and exists by accident. To deny this possibility is akin to denying reason itself; it is akin to sticking one's head in the sand, striving to remain forever ignorant.

Secondly, if we follow this train of thought that everything might be meaningless, we must inevitably also accept the consequence that knowledge, the very tool we most use in comprehending the world, is also meaningless and an accident, a vain attempt to find meaning where there is none. We must recognize it as nothing more than a byproduct of human evolution and a tool that is very much prone to making mistakes. Its own logic spells its own doom, as in order to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that knowledge does not pass its own standards.

Thirdly, there is clearly some sort of order in the natural world, as we perceive it. Order is itself a human word and, for all we know, a human concept. Whatever the case may be, we recognize some sort of order and, in keeping with objectivity, also recognize that this order is neither humane nor human; it is not made for us, it does not take us, our ideals and our suffering, into account.

Fourthly, due to all the reasons and thoughts stated above, we cannot but also question our own conclusions. A human being cannot think outside the scope of knowledge, therefore all critiques of knowledge as such may also be completely mistaken. We must then also recognize that, even though we cannot (yet) grasp it, some sort of meaning, for lack of a better term, may exist in the universe. We may never understand the workings of the universe, through no fault of our own. That does not mean, however, that we have any reason in stopping. Our drive towards the truth has benefitted all our lives greatly, and while we cannot prove the objective good in such an endeavour, we cannot deny the great subjective pleasure it has brought us. We can move forward because we effectively have nothing to lose.