

#### 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.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since time immemorial, humans have considered themselves to occupy a special and unique position in the universe. As rational beings, they have proclaimed their superiority in many ways, and that attitude is clearly reflected on ancient accounts of the world and nature, which placed humans at the top of all beings and their home, the earth, at the centre of the universe. Since they considered themselves to be in such a remarkable position, they have also tried to justify their existence and ascribe a reason to it. A most prominent example of such an attempt is the christian doctrine, according to which God created humans in his own image. This doctrine thus reflects the need of humans to attribute their existence to some ultimate cause or reason, in accordance to their special account of themselves.

In the passage provided however, Eugene Thacker maintains a distinctly different position; that we should bear in mind that there may be no special reason behind our existence and the existence of everything in general. Furthermore, she argues that << the split between subject and object is only our name for something equally accidental we call knowledge>>; thus that our conception of ourselves as something unique, as subjects, could well be a delusion, and that knowledge itself, the very foundation of all our beliefs, which is responsible for most of our accounts of reality, could in fact be a matter of contingency. Lastly, she implies that the order that the world may have, could be totally indifferent towards our existence.

In this essay, i will examine each of Thacker’s propositions. I will argue that indeed there is no ultimate external reason behind our existence and the existence of the world. Then, i will examine whether knowledge is to be considered accidental or contingent, and if so in what sense. I will also show that the distinction between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ depends on the process of knowledge and on language, while it does not hold at a fundamental level. Lastly, i will argue that our existence has a meaning *in itself*, which is up to us to discover.

#### **1. IS THERE A REASON BEHIND EXISTENCE?**

Eugene Thacker’s first proposition concerns the possibility of the fact that there could be no reason behind existence; that of ourselves and that of the universe. Thacker actually

sustains that this is a possibility that we should seriously consider. However, many people would find the absence of reason a frustrating and disarming possibility. Why does this happen; that are we so reluctant to adopt such a view, and is there evidence supporting it?

Regarding the first part of the question, the answer is interwoven with human psychology as well as the conception that humans sustain about themselves. In all, or should we say in most, people, there is a strong sensation of contrast between themselves and the outside world, between themselves and nature. The fact that we are different from all other beings in the sense that we have reason and the capacity to think, imagine and innovate, and that with those tools we manage to explore, understand and even harness nature, has instilled in us a sense of superiority, further expanding the gap between us and the world around us. Since we form such a concept of ourselves, we try to justify and explain how a being so unique as a human came to exist. Furthermore, the continuous quest for the discovery of an ultimate reason behind our existence is fostered by a misunderstanding, sustained by many humans. According to that view, if we discover that no such reason is in place, our very existence and the position we occupy in the world will be undermined. Hence, the significance of our being is in this way thought to be threatened by the lack of a reason underlying it. This misunderstanding is often subconscious, and one can verify its presence by considering themselves in their true scale in the universe. Very often, one will feel very small and insignificant and even think that life is futile. However, as I will show later on, we should not sustain such an impression.

Furthermore, the role of logic and imagination is decisive in the entertainment of the fact there should be reasons behind the existence of everything and, especially, of that of ourselves. A fundamental function of logic is that of searching for causes in the world. The universe is considered to function according to laws of causality which have been inferred through observations and comprise an important section of science. Even if at one point there is no obvious cause behind a state or phenomenon, we have the capacity to conceive of *logically possible causes* and explanations about it, using reason and elements of imagination. That process also applies to the search of meaning or reason behind existence that humans are involved in. We are capable of proposing *possible causes* that could ascribe *reason* to existence, in order to fulfill our intrinsic desire for meaning in the world and ourselves. Thus, we imagine and conceive of doctrines and explanations that attribute the reason we seek for to our existence. One example already mentioned in the introduction is that of the existence of God, which meets all requirements, as it makes us feel special, it provides us with a meaning and purpose in life, while helping us combat the feeling of insecurity and futility that the lack of reason would invoke.

Proceeding to the second part of the question, is there evidence that support the position that existence has no special reason underlying it? Modern science has shown that reality can be explained through a series interactions between particles and is dependent on matter, which was created by the big bang roughly 14 billion years ago. Even though science could provide with an explanation about reality since the big bang, there is not the slightest evidence about what happened before it, and the aforementioned explanation does not include any ultimate reason but the interaction of cold, lifeless matter. Hence, there is no ultimate plan according to which the universe exists.

When it comes to the existence of God, not only it is impossible to prove, but there are also serious arguments that undermine its plausibility, so i will exclude God from the discussion of this essay.

But what is the case regarding our existence? Biology and the evolutionary theory has shown that an accurate description of our existence would be a "biological accident". The grounds for that proposition lay in the fact that evolution does not follow a certain predetermined plan. In fact, all evolutionary progress is achieved through random and contingent mutations; changes in the genetic code, that occur due to errors in its transcription. These differentiations in the genetic code give rise to the existence of new species, of which the fittest survive.

Hence, we have reached the conclusion that there is serious ground for accepting thicker's first proposition. The scientific and biological theories are not only founded in data and observation, but they also enjoy sufficient coherence so as to be considered very plausible. Thus, i maintain that there is indeed no special reason behind existence and that when it comes to us, we entertain the prejudice that everything should entail such a reason, because it accords with our conception of ourselves as superior and special beings. If we accept the opposite, we think that the significance of our existence is threatened.

## **2. KNOWLEDGE, 'SUBJECT' AND 'OBJECT'**

Thicker's second proposition regards the fact that the distinction between 'subject' and 'object' could be intertwined with knowledge, which may actually be accidental. From the previous chapter it is has been made clear why knowledge could in a way be considered accidental. Knowledge depends on humans, as intelligible and rational beings which are able to reflect, formulate logical propositions and arguments, draw inferences and all in all conceive of 'knowledge' as a notion. Thus, since our existence is contingent and knowledge depends on us in order to exist as a concept, it is accidental and contingent itself. However, that is only true regarding its existence. What happens when it comes to its structure, its function and the way through which it is acquired? Can it be regarded as accidental in that sense?

Instead of the word accidental, i shall now use the term contingent from now on, as it is more descriptive of what the *form* of human knowledge in the following analysis. It is reasonable to assume that the form of knowledge is dependant on the 'subject' that maintains its concept and acquires or creates it. Thus, human knowledge depends on the structure and the function of humans. Since it arises from us and it is handled by us, it has to be compatible with the the way we function, as regards our sensory organs and our brains. Even though other rational beings, if they should exist, would probably also maintain a concept of knowledge similar to that of ours in its essence, it would be different as to its acquisition, processing and the way in which it is expressed, thus in its *form*, to the degree that those hypothetical beings would be different from humans. Hence, since our nature is contingent as i have shown, the *form* of human knowledge is also contingent in that way. For example, the fact that human knowledge relies on notions that correspond to words, which we then

use in order to process and advance it, by creating sentences, is actually interwoven with the fact that our brains are compatible with that system of communication.

However, in another sense, knowledge is not contingent, and that is its essence and its dependability on logic. Logic is something interwoven with humans but not necessarily confined to them. Any other rational being would have the capacity of logic, and thus knowledge founded on the latter. What would be different would not be logic or knowledge *in itself*, but rather the way in which it is processed, handled and communicated, and also its extent, which depends on a being's rational capacities as well as the acuteness of its sensory organs, thus the *form* of knowledge.

Now let's return to the matter of the difference between 'subject' and 'object'. Should we dismiss that distinction as arbitrary or anthropocentric? According to my interpretation of Thacker's proposition, this difference arises from the very process of knowing, as well as from language. When i am getting to know something, i am the 'subject' who examines the thing i am trying to get to know, which is the 'object' of my examination and of my knowledge. No matter whether my knowledge refers to a human being or a table, in my mind i have to make the distinction between myself and the 'object' of my knowledge. This is how our language functions.

However, in spite of the distinction between 'subjects' and 'objects', it should be stressed that everything is made of the same elements and, thus, at a molecular level, everything is the same and such a distinction does not hold. It only holds if we consider reality as we perceive it, from our point of view and our position in the world.

### **3.THE INNATE REASON OF OUR EXISTENCE**

The last of Tucker's propositions maintains that in spite of the fact that the world may have a certain order, that order is indifferent to our existence. If we consider my previous analysis on chapter 1, we will understand that indeed the world and its order is only a matter of interacting particles, and that it is rational to suppose that there is no ultimate reason behind our existence, nor a God that has created the universe. Thus, it is obvious that matter alone cannot but be indifferent to our existence, since it has no consciousness and thus any capacity to be anything else than indifferent. We are therefore only parts of a material world, which totally ignores our existence and there is nothing external giving reason and meaning to it.

At this point i should like to return to the misunderstanding i mentioned in chapter 1. Does the fact that there is no ultimate reason behind our existence undermine its significance? What should be our attitude towards the lack of reason? I may have sounded pessimistic in the previous chapters, however the purpose of the previous examination was to showcase that even if nothing external provides reason to our existence, this is something that we should do by ourselves. We may be a biological accident, we may not be such a unique creature favoured by some God, but we enjoy the fortune of being conscious beings and rational beings. If we consider those facts, we shall discover that we have a great potential and a host of opportunities in our lives. Thus, *we do not need anything external to provide*

*reason to our existence*. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant stated, although in a completely different context, humans should be considered as *ends in themselves*. This proposition is the crux and the result of this essay, and it is a rather optimistic one.

Even though we may feel insignificant within the universe, we should take into account that 'significance' and 'reason' and 'meaning' are products of our existence and notions shaped by humans. In a world of mere matter, none of these notions would 'mean' anything, or have any place. Thus, along with being small and just another part of the universe, we have the ability to reflect, to create concepts, to know, or at least to try to get to know, to experience happiness and to interact with other people. All those aspects of our existence, in my opinion, render it *meaningful in itself*, and comprise the sole *innate reason* for it.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this essay i have shown that in spite of our tendency to discover an ultimate reason for existence, in fact there is none other than physical events when it comes to the universe and biological errors when it comes to us, thus confirming Tucker's proposition. I have then examined the concept of knowledge and argued that it is accidental as to its existence, contingent as to its form, but not as to its essence which is unanimous for all rational beings. Regarding 'subjects' and 'objects', i maintained that the distinction is interwoven with the process of knowledge and the structure of language, but does not hold in the elementary, molecular level. Lastly, i have argued that in spite of the lack of an external or ultimate reason behind our existence, it is meaningful in itself and we should by no means question its significance.