

## 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.

“Shed some light on that matter for me!”

This is a phrase commonly used in the English speaking world (and not only, in its respective translations into other languages) for when a rather obscure issue is raised. For a solution to be found, it is necessary that the aforementioned “obscurity” is, if not removed completely, at least broken, penetrated into. To that end, the metaphorical “rays” of light come in hand - but while this approach may be beneficial at most times, in some cases it is not “light” that needs to be shed, but rather a “grain of doubt” that has to be sown in order for clarity to be reaped.

### I. Introduction

This quotation from Eugene Thacker appears to shake the very grounds of the world as we know it in terms of existence and our knowledge of it. It challenges commonly held (and generally accepted) philosophical ideas on three main levels: (a) metaphysical, through the introduction of a possible lack of reason behind things existing; (b) epistemological, for putting the founding concept of knowledge forward as problematic; (c) ethical, because of the implications that might flow from the proposed detachment of human existence from the universal order of things, if there is one such at all.

In order for the excerpt to be properly worked through, these three points have to first be addressed individually. In this essay, I am going to discuss each of them separately, and then attempt at summarising and combining all three aspects so as to draw a final conclusion.

### II. The problem with metaphysics in the present

In her book “Ethics since 1900”, Mary Wornock suggests that in modern times, ethical pursuits of Western philosophers have been carried out independently, rather than as a step to building an omnipresent, Hegelian-style philosophical system aiming to explain anything in the world. If we accept to ignore the fact that this statement centers around ethics in particular, from a more general point of view it suggests that there is some underlying

problem with metaphysics. Something must have led to analytic philosophy adopting the alluded exclusive approach which is shown to be in place as far as the branch of ethics is concerned.

The reason behind this statement would come to us in an instant once we look closer at the word “exclusive”. This lean towards exclusion stems from no other than the broad terms of metaphysics themselves, and the fact that those are now being re-evaluated as too broad. If we divide the modern history of philosophy into modern (with no need to distinguish between early and late modern in this particular case) and contemporary, it appears that contemporary philosophers predominantly choose to refrain from devoting to such ambitious tasks. There is nothing wrong or embarrassing to this tendency, nor does it constitute a defining characteristic of contemporary philosophy. It is just a peculiarity that separates its development from that of its predecessor (with its notable figures such as Kant and Hegel).

As we appoint the problematic nature of metaphysics to its being too extensive a field, the first part of Thacker’s quotation comes forward: “We have to entertain the possibility that there is no reason for something existing”. This point is central to any further - contemporary! - research to be conducted. On the one hand, acknowledging it as a legitimate possibility is a necessary condition for the pursuit of ethics or any other type of philosophical matter exclusively to be embarked on in the first place. On the other hand, transforming then the act of acknowledgment into one of acceptance is crucial to the legitimacy of any philosophical theory that might be forged in the process.

What I did to this moment, is show that the detachment from devising an all-encompassing philosophical system is possible only through accepting that there might be no universal reason of existence. Now I can move to the next part of the question, which deals with the uniformity of knowledge.

### III. The Naturalistic Fallacy

This is a term that was introduced by the philosopher G. E. Moore in regard to the attempts of defining “good”. The problem is, we, humans, would go on to define it through things that are considered good. Our proofs would thus be part of the natural world, while the “good”, the concept of it and its universal definition that we are trying to derive, is immaterial. In the end, it is impossible to define immaterial entities, of which “good” is representative, in terms of the natural world, and this gives rise to the so called “Naturalistic Fallacy”. Setting off from here, I will now use a similar approach to provide evidence to the second part of the quotation, that it is possible “that the split between subject and object is only our name for something equally accidental we call knowledge”.

The subject-object relationship is central to any influential theory on knowledge. One of the main objective of such theories, besides deciding what knowledge should be based on (rationalism vs empiricism), is providing an answer to the question how knowledge is achieved. “How do we know?” is the enquiry that Kant’s transcendental idealism gave an infamous answer to, but it is also an enquiry built on the use of a specific pronoun: “we”.

“We”, that is, “we, humans” becomes the subject of knowledge, and that in itself is problematic.

To “know” something, it is believed that being aware of its defining characteristics is enough. However, these characteristics fall into categories and are subject to divisions created by us, humans. We divide things into “good” and “bad”, “beautiful” and “repulsive”, “pleasant” and “painful”. Thus, we are both the ones setting the framework of knowledge, and the ones exercising it. This is what the aforementioned problem consists of: the lack of an external source of regulations regarding knowledge.

The obvious counter-argument to my last point would simply call for turning back to the first part of the quotation, and restoring the previous state of there being an universal reason for existence. Nevertheless, this is impossible, since we already proved the possible lack of such reason is a necessary condition to any further inquiry into a specific branch of philosophy, and epistemology conclusively counts as such. To resolve this purely epistemological issue, we need to concentrate on it exclusively, and to do so, we need to acknowledge and accept the possibility that “there is no reason for something existing”. By removing the external regulating body, we have to fill the void immediately, so it is replaced by us, humans. Our being both the legislative body on the rules of “knowing” and the subject perceiving any object-to-be, we cast doubt on the very matter of knowledge.

The idea of “knowledge”, similar to that of “good”, is universal, and thus cannot be set into specific frames - in this case, purely human. I did not mean for the fallacy described so far to be accepted not “naturalistic” in nature. Instead, I claim that the the approach to constituting it follows the logical flow of the term introduced by G. E. Moore. Since the subject-object relationship is a concept created by humans, and it is impossible to define “knowledge” in general using such narrow terms, we have to accept that this “split between subject and object” might not be all there is to knowledge. Consequently, it is plausible to say that it is “only our name for something equally accidental we call knowledge”. This remains so until we are capable of refuting this statement beyond doubt, and to this moment, we have no means of doing so.

Now, I will be moving to the last part of the quotation, and look into the influence the points made so far can exert on humans and human society.

#### IV. Consequences to the future of humanity

The two parts of Thacker’s statement I proved to hold true so far seem to pose a threat to the previously considered endless possibilities that lay out in front of humanity. This impression is strengthened close to the end of the quotation which calls for a conclusive separation of the human existence from the great order of things, in case one such has ever existed. I will now prove that such danger is insufficient by employing two interconnected ideas on my side - the idea of progress and the rise of existentialism.

In the previous periods of human history, societies all over the world have been dominated by religions often proclaiming the idea of “life after death”. This provided people with the

much needed insurance that the meaning of life may not be found in its course in the material world, for it is to be revealed when a person's soul transcends into another, immaterial one. In its core, this belief corresponds with the idea of a universal order of things that is in place, of which human existence is just a single, constituting part that presumably does not bear much importance in itself. Now that the contemporary world finds itself past the dominance of such doctrines, however, it might seem that humans have been left on their own entirely helpless. The human existence, some might argue, becomes meaningless for it is even deprived of the opportunity to find meaning in the afterlife.

On the contrary, I claim that this is not the case under any circumstances. The idea of the "eschaton", of the apocalyptic day of retribution that awaits us, has not been lost entirely, it just exists under a different form. It has been eventually replaced by the idea of progress, in all fields and areas of life. Life in itself, though closed in the course of our material existence, has not lost meaning, but rather the search for it has become much more intensified.

Furthermore, the "hopelessness" that I already mentioned gave rise to the philosophy of existentialism. Not only has dividing the micro- and macrocosm not doomed humanity, but it has even set it free in a sense unknown to that point. This is best exemplified in Sartre's idea that existence precedes life because people are the ones creating their own selves. As we already introduced the possibility of a lack of an external force exercising power, this idea now transfers onto the human existence - existentia - as well.

## V. Conclusion

The starting point of certainty, "Cogito ergo sum", was introduced centuries ago by philosopher R. Descartes. Before reaching it, however, he had to cast doubt on anything that surrounded him, and that was necessary for the much needed insurance to be found.

In this essay, I attempted at doing a similar thing, building my argument around the quotation by Eugene Thacker. First, I exposed the problematic nature of metaphysics to state the possibility of a lack of an universal reason for things existing. Then, I used this as a supporting evidence to the idea that the commonly held subject-object relationship might be a merely human, and thus not universally true, concept of knowledge. Finally, I used this all to refute the claim that these two points point to a horrible outcome for humanity. In conclusion, the detachment from a general order of things that may or may not be in place does not only not mean an end to being human. On the contrary, it proves insignificant, and helps paving the way to finding its true meaning.