

A PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK INTO THE COSMOS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show why the cosmos has been an important theme in the philosophical tradition. With the aid of some historical and conceptual references, we illustrate what it means that the human experience has a cosmological character: the close relationship between the world and the cosmos, the origins of Logos and astronomy, between the universe and the knowledge of human beings, the moral meaning of contemplatio caeli as an "elevation" above human concerns. For a number of reasons, this tradition has fallen into obscurity. The conquest of space has no spiritual relevance anymore; there is a gap between the cosmos and the world, as if they were different things. The remembrance of that relevance aims to create an incentive of a new cultural background of extraterrestrial experience.

Keywords: *cosmos, cosmological ineptitude, elevation, Logos, self-knowledge*

FILOZOFSKI POGLED V VESOLJE

IZVLEČEK

Namen tega prispevka je pokazati, zakaj je bilo vesolje vedno pomembna tema v filozofski tradiciji. S pomočjo nekaterih zgodovinskih in konceptualnih referenc tako prikazujemo, kaj pomeni, da ima človeška izkušnja kozmološki karakter: tesen odnos med svetom in vesoljem, med izvorom logosa in astronomije, med vesoljem in znanjem ljudi, moralnim pomenom contemplatio caeli kot „vzvišenostjo“ nad človeškimi skrbmi. Prav zaradi številnih razlogov je bila ta tradicija pozabljena. Osvojitve vesolja nima več duhovne pomembnosti, saj obstaja vrzel med vesoljem in svetom, kot bi bili

dve popolnoma različni stvari. Spomin na to pomembnost pa je usmerjen v ustvarjanje spodbude za novo kulturno ozadje nezemeljske izkušnje.

Ključne besede: *vesolje, vesoljski nesmisel, vzvišenost, logos, znanje o sebi*

COSMOLOGICAL INEPTITUDE

The aim of this paper is to show why the cosmos has been an important theme in philosophical tradition. Today, however, it has fallen almost complete into obscurity. Because of this obscurity, not only has a large piece of cultural heritage been lost, but our ability to reflect upon ourselves has been impoverished. The human experience has a cosmological character – this was the assumption of tradition. With the aid of some historical and conceptual references, I would like to offer some cues for reflection on the topicality of this assumption.

Philosophers no longer talk of the cosmos. It sounds like an obsolete term that at most recalls an old metaphysical concept and an erroneous astronomical model. This remarkable simplification betrays a more general problem, namely that for a series of reasons, the universe no longer comes into our experience, be it theoretical or common. I call this phenomenon *cosmological ineptitude*: the disinterest in what is beyond our earthly surroundings, in that which is above our heads. Ineptitude means that we have lost cultural tools, and in a manner of speaking, the very sensitivity, the stimulus to look up and be overtaken by philosophical wonder through the heavenly spectacle. A wonder that is full of questions.

These statements may seem bizarre in the space age era *par excellence*, where we are continually bombarded by images of the universe, where man pushes forward as never before. The problem is that this great enterprise involves scientists, technological equipment and specialised research institutes, but rarely results in a broader cultural development. Furthermore, the conquest of space remains locked in a competitive circuit of expertise, power, economics and national prestige. In this way, it risks resembling a business just like any other, devoid of the huge potential intellectual attraction that the universe, the cosmic dimension, should have for everyone.

In fact, if we glance at the main themes in philosophical-cultural debate, if we survey the average level of attention towards space endeavours is really low, even at school curriculum level. And yet, the excess of advertisement-like images and sensationalism of the “space race” trivialise the matter. The sky is screened off by images and smog; it seems the more we build skyscrapers, the more we look downwards. Also, the globalisation in which we are immersed already occupies our mind with a scenario so vast as to leave no scope for further expansion. We are already so saturated and

hyper-stimulated by the global dimension of events that the addition of more seems simply impossible. As it stands just now, the cosmos is a matter far from the world. Apart from the occasional jolt caused by environmental scares, the cosmos is something we leave to science, science fiction and poetry.

COSMOS

I have said that the word “cosmos” is in disuse, while “world” is on everyone’s lips. And yet *mundus* was the Latin translation of *kosmos*, the word used by the Greeks to indicate a unitary, ordered¹ set of pleasing aspects (Kranz, 1958). Things form a whole if they are interconnected; the connections can be of various types but what counts is the idea of overall unity which has nothing outside itself and is therefore independent, which has in itself the reasons for its existence and its value. The spherical form was chosen precisely because it seemed to best represent this full, perfectly balanced and self-consistent unit whose rotational movement connects the beginning and the end. It is known that the model of the cosmos as concentric spheres, finite and eternal, was sanctioned by Aristotle and endured for centuries, enriched by a dense web of metaphysical, theological, mathematical and musical speculation and symbolism.

What must be emphasised about this “spherology” is primarily the constant presence of heaven and earth and secondly, the cosmos’ capacity to stimulate intellectual curiosity. The word “world” (or cosmos) did not bring to mind the earth *only* or the sky *only*, but the very relationship between these two planes. The celestial plane was prevalent because the principal natural phenomena were regulated by it: day and night, the seasons, light and darkness, humidity and heat, duration and places had their fulcra in the astronomical quadrant formed by solstice and equinox points, intersected by the axis joining the poles (D’Anna, 2006). The course of human events, based on the stages of life enclosed within the cycle of birth and death were inseparable from what was happening in the sky, which was nevertheless not simply an exterior scene, but something that entered into the rhythm and orientation of the terrestrial world (Kranz, 1958), assuming certain mythological, astrological and sacred forms, and also taking the form of theoretical, aesthetic and practical reasoning. The notion of *kosmos* became the occasion of calculation and representation (Ephemeris, geometric projections, celestial and terrestrial maps), the occasion of ritual with which to read time and renew social bonds (calendars, festivities, recurrences and rituals), a model for

1 The other word was *aion*, the Latin *saeculum*, which is reflected in the Nordic languages: *welt* and *world* indicate the time marked by and generations, as derived from the compound of **veraz*, i.e. *vir*, man, and *alere*, to grow (Dognini 2002). In the following, I will deliberately and in interchangeable manner use the terms ‘cosmos’ and ‘world’, to emphasise that they are not two different concepts.

the construction of cities (for example the Roman *cardi* and *decumani*, laid out in accordance with the cardinal points; or the Greek *agora*, centre of the common world), a symbol of balancing justice, an equivalent of the harmony produced by the correct proportioning of music intervals. All of this without forgetting the dark side, chaos, excess and disharmony which lay not just in the distant past, in the bowels of the earth or in the arbitrariness of human action, but also in the irregularity of the sky, whose immediate sign was weather changes while the astronomical manifestation was retrogradation of the planets and the precession of the equinoxes (D'Anna, 2006).

HEAVENLY THOUGHTS

Several archaeological finds from the Neolithic age and then a series of correspondences between the main Indo-European civilisations confirm that from the origins of history, the relationship between sky and earth has been a very strong and probably decisive in the shaping of rational thought. The megalithic monuments of Stonehenge, the Pyramids, the Mesopotamian tabulations, the innumerable variations of astral symbols formed by the cross, circle, radial and spiral forms (cuneiform script itself apparently derives from astral signs) and most of the mythological cycles: they are all testimony to a cosmologically imprinted culture (De Santillana-Von Dechend 1983). And men in any case were considered mediators between the terrestrial belly and the heavenly vault, so they had to be able to interpret the signs coming from both sides.

With their *theoria* – knowledge with no utilitarian purpose – the Greeks transmitted to our civilisation a deep sense of these archaic cosmological experiences. There is a recurring image that reaches the first age of modernity, according to which we are all children of the sky. Plato for example says that “We are heavenly plants, not earthly ones; sinking the roots of our head right up there, from where the soul drew its first generation, the divine part holds our entire body upright” (*Thym.* 90a). He believed there was an analogy between the movement of thought and the movement of the stars; not by chance, with sight we can “break free from the earth” and look at the sky to discover the mathematical key to rational order, that holds everything together (*Thym.* 47a–b; 90c). This is not a simple rhetorical or fanciful image because it does in fact suggest some interesting considerations. The plant is a living thing; that which lives is movement and transformation – but according to a rule, a rhythm, a form – and for this reason it could be said to “have thought”. Nevertheless, human thought – like astral periods – is circular; it turns round on itself; it is reflexive. Not only do we think, we reflect on what we think, on what we do, what happens when we think (today we call it self-knowledge). When we reason about something, we try to understand how it is

made, what its defining logic is; but it is in doing this that we understand what it is to reason, to pursue a line of logic. Thus knowledge is reflexive; it is a mirror. To know oneself and to know what surrounds us is a unique circular process. Naturally, it often turns in a vacuum. And in fact we know only a miniscule piece of the *Logos*, of the world and of ourselves.

But the analogy between mind and cosmos also has a genetic trait. Theoretical capacity i.e. the effort to see far beyond the immediacy of perception, owes much to observation of the sky. The bewildered Thales falling into a well while he watched the sky remains an unforgettable emblem of the birth of abstract thought. The drawn-out period of time needed to observe, hand down and compare astronomical data was perhaps the germ of science, intended as gradual and systematic knowledge. The concepts of order, unity, totality, relation, time and space are by their very nature primarily cosmological; in a generic sense and in the sense that the concept of world embraces them all. The formation of the concept of space and time was based on the position and the movement of the heavenly bodies; there was a need for these references, for one to be able to orientate oneself in the vortex of the becoming. There was a need for them to form an idea of the world, in a precise sense that there is something stable and lasting and which repeats despite all the changes and devastation which occur. Men, things and events pass; but we say that they pass so that something remains; there is a unitary horizon in which we can write the becoming. The idea of the world, of *being* in a durative and extensive sense, is inseparable from the idea of unity, correlation and totality; otherwise there would be only segments, becoming and dispersion. The essential categories of thought are forged by observing what surrounds us; reciprocally, it is because of the structure of thought that the many surrounding segments form a world.

Certainly the immensity of the universe infinitely surpasses the capacity of thought. But in the end we also know little of thought. So it would be better to say that we ignore the absolute measure of both because we do not exactly know the origin, extension and modifications of both.

Lucretius said that the worlds are innumerable; all destined for destruction, in supreme indifference, with no aim whatsoever. *In no wise the nature of all things/ for us was fashioned by a power divine/ So great the faults stands encumbered with* (*De rer. nat.* II, V, 95–97).

So when he sang *caelesti sumus omnes semine oriundi* (*De rer. nat.*, II, 1031; we all come from celestial seed), he was saying also that we have been thrown *out* in the cosmos, like a *nudus infans*.

*Then, again, the babe,
Like to the castaway of the raging surf,
Lies naked on the ground, speechless, in want
Of every help for life, when Nature first*

*Hath poured him forth upon the shores of light
With birth-pangs from within the mother's womb
(De rer. nat., V, 223–227)*

We are also somewhat foreign to cosmos; only in part is it *our* residence. In terms of categories of thought do limitation and extraneousness translate into concepts of nothingness, emptiness and negation, and, of course, pure possibility.

PETERE ALTUM

When considerations of this kind are made, the suspicion always arises that we are dealing with metaphysical speculations. However, in the past, as today, it is difficult to speak of the universe without eventually ending up dealing with metaphysical considerations in highly speculative hypotheses. Even before the huge dimensions and the problem of infinity, it is the very concept of totality, of the origin and connectedness of all things, of space and time that carries us beyond the plane of what is rigorously verifiable and demonstrable.

Let us leave for a moment the concepts, and let us suppose for an instant that we had the occasion to take night-time walks. From whence does the strange idea spring which inspires the cosmic spectacle, sublime and at the same time frightening? Why does it provoke meditations on existence, with the classic attendant questions of who are we, where do we come from and how it will end? Amidst these silent immensities, what is the reason for all the anxieties, desires, struggles and even knowledge? What are we doing here?

The wonder (*thauma*), we know, is what leads us to philosophise, to ask ourselves unusual questions.

That it is not a science of production is clear even from the history of the earliest philosophers. For it is owing to their *wonder* that men at that time began first to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. *about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe* (Aristotle, *Met.*, 982b, 10)

The point, however, is why the cosmos should arouse such wonder, that particular state of emotive tension that pushes us to ask strange questions. A simple answer is that it is the cosmic gaze that draws us beyond the confines of our familiar environment, like when we see things from a new and unusual perspective. We look up to have a wider vision that allows us to understand where we are. But to look from above, from

outside is a paradoxical experience, since it is *we* who see ourselves. We are corralled into a frontal encounter as outsiders with our own places and our own lives.

To look upwards, to broaden our gaze, to elevate, to overcome the pettiness of human affairs is another typical cosmological *topos*. Men tear themselves apart for riches and power; they are prey to innumerable desires, fears and deliria. And thus the moral philosophers invited them to raise their gazes upwards (*petere altum*) to pause, to literally note the distances, indeed the measurements of what usually seems so important to us. The soul, “As it moves among the stars, takes pleasure in docking the floors of the rich and the whole earth with its gold” (Seneca, *Nat. Quaest.*, I, Praef., 6–7). *O quam contempta res est homo, nisi supra humana surrexerit!* (Seneca, *Nat. Quaest.*, I, Praef., 5; O what a contemptible thing is man, unless he rises above human concerns!).

Supra humana: the sky is transcendent by definition, is immense, over our heads. For all the heads at any latitude, it is superior to those with their feet on the earth. And when we are in an aeroplane we are in some way with our feet on the earth; we are based on something. From this point of view, the films of cosmonauts suspended in mid-air, but in general the living conditions on the extraterrestrial plane are very interesting. They are an unprecedented piece of the history of the elevation.

The vertical direction – that of elevation, has many meanings, including religious ones. But all of them refer to the uniquely human ability to “sweep around” with the gaze and with thought. Going deep and looking upwards have something in common, as if one direction might in some way lead to the other. Kant’s famous motto, “The starry sky above me, the moral law within me” renews this ancient intuition.

And with regard to the past – I have turned to the past not to regurgitate old images of the world; my reason is simply because that is where we can clearly grasp the importance of the cosmos to human experience, as much at the cognitive level as morally, aesthetically and existentially (uniting these levels is precisely the thing that makes a cosmos of reality).

We are in the era of global and space conquests. Perhaps its time to awaken ourselves from the cosmological sleep in which we have fallen.

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