

**Philosophy and the Sun**

Charlotte Szász

'Light' is very naturally associated with 'insight.' This can be found at the beginning of philosophy in Plato's analogy of the sun. It comes before the analogy of the divided line and the famous allegory of the cave in the sixth part of *The Republic*. It starts with insight and light being used metaphorically. This section of the text is referred to as 'the Glaucon,' because it is here we find the dialogues between Plato's older brother, Glaucon, and his mentor, Socrates. Glaucon pressures Socrates to define 'goodness' and Socrates pretends to be incapable. He draws an analogy instead of giving a definition. Just as the sun illuminates, giving us the ability to see and be seen through the eyes of others, so too with the idea of goodness; it illuminates the intelligible with truth. The sun is a metaphor for the nature of reality and knowledge concerning it, Socrates says:

"Here's how you can think about the mind as well. When its object is something which is lit up by truth and reality, then it has—and obviously has—intelligent awareness and knowledge. However, when its object is permeated with darkness (that is, when its object is something which is subject to generation and decay), then it has beliefs and is less effective, because its beliefs chop and change, and under these circumstances it comes across as devoid of intelligence."

(Plato: *The Republic*, 508d)

*Philosophy and the Sun* is an adapted and extended version of the lecture Charlotte Szász gave at Black Box teater as part of the all-night performance project, *Waiting for the Sun*, in November 2017.

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Socrates goes on to say that knowledge is to be found in "... that region in which truth and real being brightly shine..." (508d). This is the intelligible illuminated by the highest idea, that of goodness. Since truth and being find their source in this highest idea, only the souls that are illumined by this source can be said to possess knowledge, whereas those souls that turn away are "...mingled with darkness...". Socrates continues by explaining that although light and sight both resemble the sun, neither can identify themselves with it. Just as the sun is rated higher than both light and sight, goodness is rated more highly than knowledge and truth. It is goodness that allows us to know the truth and makes it possible to have knowledge. Through this analogy, Socrates helps Glaucon come to the realization that goodness is of inestimable value, being both the source of knowledge and truth, as well as more valuable and unattainable. The sun not only makes objects visible but is necessary for their growth and nourishment. Similarly, goodness not only makes it possible for things to be, but also allows for things to be known.

Hegel later pronounces the relation of the self with the sun:

"Matter in its first qualified state is pure identity-with-self, unity of reflection-into-self, and hence the first, still quite abstract manifestation. As existent in Nature, it is the reference to itself as independent in face of

the other determinations of the totality. This existent, universal self of matter is Light—as an individuality it is a star; as a star which is a moment of a totality, it is the sun."

(Hegel: *Part Two of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, § 275, p. 87)

As Hegel further explains in the annotation of the encyclopedia: "Having developed the Notion of light, we must now, secondly, inquire into its reality. To say that we have to consider the existence of light, is to say that we have to consider the being-for-another of light. But light is itself the positing of being-for-another; in the existence of light, we must therefore set forth the being...for-another of this being...for-another. How is visibility made visible? How is this process of manifestation itself made manifest? Manifestation demands a Subject, and the question is how this Subject exists. Light can only be called matter in so far as it exists independently in an individualized form. This individualization consists in the fact that light exists as a body. Light constitutes the real existence or the physical import of the Body of Abstract Centrality, which real existence is in the form of a luminous body: This is the Sun, the self-luminous body. This fact is empirically ascertained, and at first, it is all we have to say about the Sun."

### **The Sun and Us**

Exposure and protection, waking and sleeping, warmth and cold are the contemporary and daily

interactions and relations we have with the sun. Sunshine boosts the natural level of serotonin in our bodies, and Vitamin D is only produced through the action of the sun's UVB rays on our skin. Both are said to make our mood lighter. Excessive exposure to ultraviolet rays has negative health effects, including sunburn and increased risk of skin cancer. Heliotherapy was invented in 1910 on the Spanish island of Tenerife, after Niels Finsen was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1903 for his idea of light therapy. By the 1910s, 'sunbathing' was a desirable activity for the upper classes.

What *is* the sun? Located at the center of the solar system, the sun is only a middle-sized star that is almost spherical in shape. It consists of hot plasma and magnetic fields. It is 1,392,000 km in diameter, which is around 109 times the size of Earth. A little less than three-quarters of the sun's mass is hydrogen and the other quarter is helium. Oxygen, carbon, neon, and iron can be found in small quantities. The sun was formed approximately 4.6 billion years ago during a gravitational collapse of matter that took place within a larger molecular cloud. The majority of the matter from the collapse gathered in the center of the cloud and the rest became the orbiting disc of the solar system. In this hot and dense core, nuclear fusion produced the sun. It is the same sun that we know today—it hasn't changed. Heat and density are vital to the sun's longevity. The sun is a star, not a planet.

That means it transmits its own light while planets only reflect light.

The essence of the sun is that of a "natural object," which has made it the focus of myths and religions throughout the history of humankind. It is a special object because it is seen and felt by every person in every era. It is a truly universal object. Yet, it is also inaccessible except through earthly perception. It is an object constructed through a discourse characterized by shifts. Shifting is therefore the discourse and the construction of its object. The sun can be nothing other than a place of interpretation. It is a universal object, but still a number of questions arise due to its specificity as a star: How did the sun become a scientific object? Under what consensus is an image of the sun constructed? Once this image is stabilized at a certain moment and taken as given, how does it become effective? How does it structure societies? Construction within this field of investigation is shared equally by interests both historical and philosophical, theological and scientific, architectural and astrophysical.

For example, Karl Marx writes in his *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844): "Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself." Marx creates a metaphor based on the scientific fact that we revolve around the sun. Philosophy's interest in the

sun is as old as philosophy itself. Between personal enjoyment and scientific interest there is Plato who thought thinking and walking in daylight were the best conditions for philosophy; there is Nietzsche who loved the sun and spent time in Sils Maria; Adorno who enjoyed his holidays in Naples; and Walter Benjamin on Ibiza. The sun is old, the world is old and thinking is old, too. The sun was once possibly the most interesting subject of a theory of the world, yet it is always “the other” of the world. More so than the moon, it is the effective source of light and life. Yet the Sun is so very different from the planet Earth, and all other planets. All we can do is to set ourselves in relation to it rather than integrate it into one thing called world. It is an oppositional force that is clearly responsible for the day, the year, work and leisure. We live by the sun—humans have always done so. Humankind has tried to integrate the sun's existence into thinking in two ways: scientifically and metaphorically. There is no entry in the dictionary of philosophy titled “the sun” because the sun is not a concept. It is much more. It's the locus of truth, understanding and otherness.

### Scientific Thinking and the Sun

The knowledge of the sun has shifted the major paradigms within the history of philosophy. Through this history of knowledge, we can explore the sun as an anthropological orientation. With this, we can raise the question of ultimate alterity and the horizon as an illusion in order to explore the

existential value of instability. A significant contribution to this was made by the scientific revolution and its main protagonists Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a Polish astronomer; Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), an Italian mathematician who believed that “the book of nature” was written in the language of mathematics; and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), a German astronomer known for his three laws of planetary motion, convinced of the world's harmony and picturesque description. Johannes Kepler grounded his cosmic hierarchy on geometry. By taking Euclidean geometry to predict the orbit of the planets, he continued the Copernican legacy.

Of these three, Copernicus has had the most influence on philosophy. He wrote seven postulates on helical movement called *Commentariolus*. Two of them are of particular interest to us: Firstly, the sun does not revolve around the earth, but the earth around the sun. Secondly, stars don't revolve around the earth, but the earth rotates on its own axis. Evidence for his theory wasn't provided until 300 hundred years later. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge and pay attention to two things: Copernicus put the sun at the center of the solar system for aesthetic reasons more than theoretical and physical reasons. When we therefore talk about the Copernican Revolution (as we do), we should remember that even though Copernicus himself talked about a revolution, he didn't mean what we mean by it today. He was

simply concerned with the idea of turning taking place in the sky. In his understanding it wasn't exactly the planets and stars that turn—the reason for this being that stars and planets were neither known nor imaginable at that time—but spheres. The scientific basis for helical movement was first written by Newton following the work of Kepler. So, the sun was placed in the center because Copernicus liked it better and movement was more easily explicated. The spheres rotated so it follows that planets rotate. For Aristotle, Copernicus and Kepler it was not planets that rotate, but spheres.

The idea of spheres became a way to fill the void of the cosmos and overcome the problem it posed—the anxiety of the vacuum, *horror vacui*—but it was not until Einstein that the idea of the ether was truly overcome. The void was filled with spheres that surround the human and provide protection.

His contemporaries were neither astonished nor shocked by Copernicus's heliocentric world view. First of all, it was not new—Aristarchus (c. 310–230 BC) had already expressed the idea that the earth is turning while the sun is resting. Second, Copernicus' system didn't provide greater precision in predicting the orbit of planets. Third, it was thought to be nonsense. We all see with our own eyes that the sun rises in the morning and sets at night.

We should therefore speak not of a Copernican “revolution” but of a Copernican “consequence,” as the revolution has proven itself to be an empty concept. The most important consequence of Copernicus's impact is that the rational and true scientist must proceed by going beyond sensual perception to produce a coherent and consistent model that explains observable occurrences. This might be an even stronger consequence than the thought of the expulsion of men from his Center (the insight of the so-called “Copernican Revolution”). Freud later picked up on the Copernican Revolution as an insult to man. An insult to man by science. The human lost his exceptional position and was forced to the outskirts of a big nothingness. Or in the words of Blaise Pascal:

“When I see man's blindness and wretchedness, when I consider the whole silent universe and man left to himself without light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, not knowing who put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him at death, incapable of any understanding, I become frightened, like someone brought in his sleep to a frightening desert island who wakes up with no knowledge or means of escape. And then I marvel that we do not fall into despair in so wretched a state. I have not been able to become attached, and, considering how

much more likely it is that there is something other than what I see, I have sought out whether this God has not left some sign of himself."

(Pascal: *Pensées, Section XI, The Prophecies*, p. 58)

Copernicus and his truth of the heliocentric world view does not deliver a solution but rather poses a problem: How can I bring together the world of explanation expressed in science and the world of experience expressed in the arts? After Copernicus we really live in two spheres: the sphere of measurement, numbers and countability, and the sphere of experience and value.

### **Metaphorical Thinking and the Sun**

After evaluating the relationship of philosophy and the sun on the scientific level, we can now move on to the metaphorical. In his text *The Solar Anus* (1931), French philosopher Georges Bataille sets the sun and the ocean into a network of connections centering on the division of male and female sexual organs.

The simplest image of organic life united with rotation is the tide.

From the movement of the sea, uniform coitus of the earth with the moon, comes the polymorphous and organic coitus of the earth with the sun.

But the first form of solar love is a cloud raised up over the liquid element.

The erotic cloud sometimes becomes a storm and falls back to earth in the form of rain, while lightning staves in the layers of the atmosphere.

The rain is soon raised up again in the form of an immobile plant.

Animal life comes entirely from the movement of the seas and, inside bodies, life continues to come from salt water.

The sea, then, has played the role of the female organ that liquifies under the excitation of the penis.

The sea continuously jerks off.

Solid elements, contained and brewed in water animated by erotic movement, shoot out in the form of flying fish.

The erection and the sun scandalize, in the same way as the cadaver and the darkness of cellars.

Vegetation is uniformly directed towards the sun; human beings, on the other hand, even

though phalloid like trees, in opposition to the other animals, necessarily avert their eyes.

Human eyes tolerate neither sun, coitus, cadavers, nor obscurity, but with different reactions.

(Bataille: *The Solar Anus, in: Visions of Excess Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, p. 7–8f)

*The Solar Anus* is a series of aphorisms which make ironic reference to the sun, which, although it brings life to the earth, can also result in death from its unrestrained energies. In a metaphysical form of art, the text is allegorical and metaphorical. It expresses non-knowledge in images that have meaning for us. It questions the validity of knowledge all together by setting a scientific object into motion through its earthly meaning. What does the sun mean? Notably the sun is sexualized in an interplay between heliophilia and heliophobia.

What Bataille attacks is the impossible end of a total identification with an object like the sun:

“Ever since sentences started to circulate in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a copula each sentence ties one thing to another; all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at

a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne’s thread leading thought into its own labyrinth. But the copula of terms is no less irritating than the copulation of bodies. And when I scream I AM THE SUN an integral erection results, because the verb to be is the vehicle of amorous frenzy.” (Bataille: *ibid.*, p. 5)

There is a significant rupture in meaning. The subject misleadingly attempts to embrace the total identification of something like a Whole, a One, a transcendence that is closed and finite. The cosmogony of Bataille is different. He subverts a discourse of a “total identification” which for him does not seem to exhaust the subject of study. It’s an idea that is critical to metaphysics. The critique is not on equal to an argument against a totality of a whole, but parodic. It does not even take the idea seriously—or too seriously? Within the parody there seems to be no end, only further parody through which the idea of lacking an end is inscribed into the structure of its critique. Famously, this critiques the father of modern philosophy, Descartes, who says about the origin of the idea’s objective reality: “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much (reality) in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause.” (Descartes: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, v. I, II*) Descartes focuses on the fact that the idea represents to him an infinite substance. He wanted to ground his philosophical

investigation in order to make knowledge immune to skepticism. Descartes found this ultimate grounding in the indubitable existence of the cogito. This is also reflected in his book *The World*, in which chapter eight “On the Formation of the Sun and the Stars of the New World” explains the swirling planets around the sun. He argues that the sun necessarily takes that place and the earth and other planets stand in necessary formation to the sun. Because God had created it. He arrives at the inevitability and necessity of a Cartesian cosmology through imposing the idea of the sun and planets to his certainty of the indubitable existence of the cogito. He excludes the reign of chaos that Bataille attacks through parody and deconstruction. There is a sense of indeterminacy or a “mobile center.”

But the absence of the myth of God, or the necessity of the world and solar system caused by God, does not mean an absence of myth tout court, as Bataille later writes:

“As it determines this moment in time, the mind necessarily withers away and, stretched to the limit, desires this withering. Myth and the possibility of myth become impossible: only an immense void remains, cherished yet wretched. Perhaps the absence of myth is the ground that seems so stable beneath my feet, yet gives way without warning.

The absence of God is no longer a closure: it is the opening up to the infinite. The absence of God is greater and more divine, than God (in the process I am no longer myself, but an absence of self; I await the sleight of hand that renders me immeasurably joyful).

(...)

The decisive absence of faith is resolute faith. (...) And today, because a myth is dead or dying, we see through it more easily than if it were alive: it is the need that perfects the transparency, the suffering which makes the suffering become joyful. ‘The night is also a sun’, and the absence of myth is also a myth: coldest, the purest, the only true myth.” (Bataille: *The Absence of Myth*, p.48)

The sun is a shifting metaphor with changing meaning and symbolizes different concepts of truth.

The sun is constituted by allegories, Copernican / Keplerian / Galilean insight, astronomical instruments and mathematical knowledge. They have all influenced the production of an object of knowledge that is neither completely absorbed in the arts nor in science, that is neither imaginary nor empirical and thereby encompasses everything. Seen in relation to the orderliness of disciplines today, we are dealing with an undefined or dispersed responsibility. It is defined by the history

of modern science and cutting-edge technology, as well as pre-modern literature and ancient art. By the cultural history of Copernicanism, Pythagorean tradition and occult knowledge. It is a precarious object produced by the limits of reality—as it is what is and therefore is never what it is. The object within this history of knowledge must never be regarded solely as made reference to, but also the way in which the object itself is referenced. Within a cultural-analytical methodology, the sun in its representations is an object that must be treated under a specific conceptualization of knowledge: Forms and representation must be correlated with the always already reformed object of knowledge. The sun attains its incomparability from being constituted by heterogenous elements of empirical data, observation, fiction, conventions of genre and cultural traditions.

### Literature

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