

EDITORIAL

AFFIRMING LIFE

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The contributions to this edition of *Cosmos & History* were not solicited; however, they do suggest a growing interest in the problematic status of life. This is evident in the first paper, ‘Why is There Life?’ and the first review article on the largely forgotten but profound anti-mechanist biologist and philosopher, Hans Driesch, showing how he struggled to do justice to the reality of life, then in an essay on the role of empathy in the evolution of humanity, followed by a piece attempting to identify and overcome the sickness of modern reason which denies value to life, invoking the good sense of indigenous people able to appreciate life to counteract this. Another paper, confronting the sixth mass extinction of life on earth, attempts to revive Schelling’s philosophy to provide the foundations for environmental ethics, while another, very much in accordance with this, argues that the creation of an ecological civilization should be taken as the goal for the whole of humanity. Despite these, there might not appear to be enough unity in the papers of this edition to justify its title. What could be the relationship between affirming life and a study of Plato’s notion of forms, Augustine’s musical cosmology, the defence of a largely forgotten tradition of Celtic Christianity combined with an attack on the current state of academia, work reviving speculative philosophy – in one case, invoking Schelling to overcome the deficiencies in Unger and Smolin’s work on time, in another, analysing Whitehead’s philosophy, a Nietzschean analysis of witchcraft in the Seventeenth Century, work on the philosophy of history, a proposed antidote to a post-truth world and aligned with this, a defence of the tradition of rhetoric as defended by Giambattista Vico to counter post-truth politics? Is there any relationship between all this and a study of how Australian sport has been debased by turning it into a business, and then conference proceedings calling for a revived IONA (Islands of the North Atlantic -Ireland and the UK) to free this region from the tyranny of corrupt politicians who have subordinated these countries to the global market? Is there any coherence to all this that can be captured by the title

Affirming Life?

This problem is not unique to this edition. *Cosmos & History* was set up to provide an outlet for people crossing disciplinary boundaries, most importantly, between the sciences and the humanities, with a concern to grapple with the broader problems of civilization and to create the future. In doing so, the journal was providing a forum for those who have been traditionally been called intellectuals. Intellectuals have been contrasted with scholars, the specialists who often disdain the work of intellectuals because, with their broad range of interests, they tend to ignore minutiae which are the scholar's bread-and-butter. Or they are contrasted with scientists, seen as experts in their particular disciplines by virtue of their refusal to be distracted by broader interests and their rigorous application of the scientific method. With the undermining of intellectuals, scholars, who tend to write for each other rather than a broader audience, have been left without any basis for defending their work. It was intellectuals who, utilizing the work of scholars to develop their insights based on broader perspectives, challenging and reforming existing culture and addressing broader audiences in doing so, who justified their work. It is not only scholars who have lost out from the denigration of intellectuals, however. Those scientists with a broad range of interests and a concern for the future of humanity, who have grappled with the more fundamental issues and bigger questions within science (which are really philosophical questions – now generally ignored by most academic philosophers), are also being marginalized.

This is problematic for science, since it is precisely these scientists who have been responsible for almost all the greatest advances in science in the past, and in the present. Robert Root-Bernstein showed that the greatest predictor of success in science has not been a high IQ, or some measure of creativity, but having a wide range of interests that are taken seriously.¹ Without these intellectuals, science is disintegrating, overwhelmed by the publication of masses of shoddy papers now clogging the channels of communication. To defend themselves, scientists now have to show that their work serves the development of technology, and this was shown by Joseph Ben-David's historical studies to be a recipe for stagnation.

Not only intellectuals, but scholars and real scientists are being replaced by supposed 'experts', the purported technocrats willing to sell themselves with the promise of advancing the ability of power elites to extend their control of nature and people. Those who are not technocratic 'experts', or their managers – who now claim

¹ Robert Root-Bernstein, 'Arts and crafts as adjuncts to STEM education to foster creativity in gifted and talented students', *Asia Pacific Educ. Rev.*, 16, 2015, 203-212.

to be ‘experts’ in management, are compelled to redefine themselves as entertainers and as part of the entertainment industry, with the sole claim to financial support being that people are willing to pay to be entertained by them.

Opposing all this has been an immense challenge. The sheer unsurveyability of publications from the plethora of micro-disciplines and their associated schools of thought, not to mention the broader culture, has made efforts to get any perspective on the world, or to make any broader claims to knowledge, challenging at the very least. It appears to be extremely difficult for people who are not specialists to say anything worthwhile about anything or to be taken seriously in their efforts to do so. Even those few intellectuals who have succeeded in breaking through the discourse of technocrats and entertainers, attract scholars who generate new specialist discourses interpreting their works, excluding those who had embraced the spirit of these intellectuals from their circles. Thus we have experts in Kant, or Hegel, or Marx, or Nietzsche, or Peirce, or Husserl, or Whitehead, or Habermas, or even Castoriadis, who also write for each other and disdain the efforts of those who embrace their work in order to further advance their quests. It might appear then that a journal such as *Cosmos & History* is merely a publisher for diverse and largely unrelated papers of not sufficiently high quality to be published in specialist journals.

What this denigration of non-specialist work overlooks is that the view of knowledge assumed by these specialists and the managers who support them, as something that can be accumulated through specialist research using the ‘scientific method’, is wrong. It is the bucket image of knowledge attacked by Karl Popper. As Paul Feyerabend showed in *Against Method*, there is no identifiable scientific method that can explain the great scientific achievements of the past. The goal of inquiry of those now recognized as great scientists has been insight, understanding and comprehension, and what is taken to be knowledge of the facts only has a place within this quest. Such comprehension involves achieving overviews through characterizing the generic features of what is being investigated, ultimately a coherent ontology adequate to the whole of reality, along with investigating the specificity of each particular instance studied from such perspectives, and research only advances when guided by these overviews while constantly questioning and revising assumptions originating in these overviews.

Achieving full comprehension, achieving a coherent overview of the whole of reality while doing justice to each particular, is a necessary but impossible goal that can never be fully realized. As Alasdair MacIntyre argued in ‘Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narratives and the Philosophy of Science’, science requires historical narratives of traditions of inquiry for this quest to retain its coherence and to advance.

There is no simple hermeneutic method for constructing such historical narratives, which are themselves advanced by creative efforts to understand radically new ideas in research, often revealing inconsistencies between different, partially successful research programs. These provide unique challenges to interpretation. Those who think they can bypass this long path to comprehension by ignoring history and its narratives and specializing within a micro-discipline, then claiming specialized knowledge, are deluding themselves and deluding others who put their faith in them. These are the purported scientific experts, now being ordained as 'technocrats'. Such delusion was revealed by a history of psychology by Edward Reed, reviewed in this edition of *Cosmos & History*. Reed showed not only the impoverished state of psychology through its separation from philosophy, but the impoverished state of philosophy consequent to having abandoned its investigations into psychology. Yet psychologists lay claim to being able to define 'normality' as the ideal form of human life to which everyone should conform.

The failure of these supposed experts is epitomized by the failure of the pre-eminent technocrats of recent decades, the post-Keynesian economists who claimed to be able to replace ethics and political philosophy as the basis for policy formation with a rigorous, mathematical science of neo-classical economics, supposedly modelling itself on physics. After the global financial crisis, they now acknowledge that they are unable explain how economies work. Their utter incompetence has been revealed by their inability to even manage hedge funds. The most successful fund manager, Warren Buffett, bet ten years ago that S&P 500 stock index would outperform these hedge funds. He has won handsomely. Honest economists have been forced to recognize the validity of the work of Hyman Minsky, an economist who not only defended Keynesian economics against facile claims that the market is self-regulating, but pointed out in his intellectual biography, *John Maynard Keynes*, the broad, humanist perspective of Keynes, his wide-ranging interests and the radicalism of his proposals. Keynes' work was grounded in the social liberalism engendered by T.H. Green which upheld higher ends than the accumulation of wealth in order to consume more.

It is not only the failure of technocrats as specialists that is problematic, however. It is the associated fragmentation and tunnel vision that has blinded people to broader realities, and the threats these pose. The civilization of modernity associated with the conquest of the world by Europeans, or at least, by European culture, is fundamentally flawed and is on a trajectory to disaster. This is evident in the current globalization of the market, which having destroyed or paralysed the institutions which had been put in place to make it serve people, is now massively concentrating wealth and power. Its logic is revealing itself. The imposition of markets on communities is associated with

the denial of value to anything that cannot be commodified and sold in the marketplace. This is the basis of its functioning and its supposed rationality. The mobility of capital legitimated by neo-classical economists involved moving industries to developing countries, exporting both jobs and pollution, in order to cut labour costs. This has rendered the economic conditions of people in affluent countries precarious. At the same time, it has impoverished huge numbers of people in these developing countries who have been pushed off their land by agribusiness companies with the support of the governments which they now control, or have had the arability of their land destroyed or their fishing grounds wrecked. To outcompete the cheap labour of these developing countries, companies operating in the developed countries are automating factories with robots, further challenging the workforce. It is claimed by Ray Kurzweil, who characterized this as the singularity, that the development of artificial intelligence associated with such automation will result in the eclipse of human intelligence. At this point, people whose significance had been defined by their capacity to function as productive workers, will be defined as worthless, superfluous to both the economy and society. The logic of the market is revealing its telos - to render humans worthless.

This is merely a further development of the process by which life itself has been denied significance. The rise of the market in the Seventeenth Century was associated with the reduction of nature to a resource to be valued only insofar as it could generate profits. This in turn was associated with the development on an instrumentalist form of reasoning and mechanistic conception of nature that have now colonized all domains of culture, despite resistance from those influenced by the tradition of Romanticism or earlier forms of thinking. The development of industrial capitalism which has massively expanded the destructive impact of humanity on the rest of nature, now threatens the current regime of the global ecosystem. The market does not generate the feedback to prevent this destruction. It has become evident that investment is most profitable as resources are used up and ecosystems damaged. It is only when clean air has to be paid for that air will be truly valued as an exploitable commodity generating profits. The growth of the market economy is at the expense of the environment. This can never properly be registered by the market because the market concentrates wealth and removes the capacity of the rest of the population to influence the direction of the economy. The refugees from the drought from North Africa and the Middle East induced by climate destabilization, or Pacific Islanders whose islands are disappearing as ocean levels rise, are powerless to prevent the greenhouse emissions destroying their lives. And future generations are entirely precluded from having any influence on the market. So long as transnational corporations are free to move capital to where-ever

costs of labour and regulation are lowest, it is almost impossible for national governments, competing with each other for capital investment, to take unilateral action, even if they could free themselves from control by transnational corporations.

Aspects of this can and have been questioned by specialists. Climate scientists are the obvious example. However, climate science itself is a relatively new discipline characterized by openness to advances in other disciplines, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology and ecology, and climate scientists have revealed the problems with such specialization. Having revealed the potential disaster we are facing, they are at a loss to understand why their insights are not being acted upon by politicians, and why in some countries (such as Australia) they are being retrenched. It is necessary to relate their work to a diversity of other areas of inquiry, for instance to the study of politics, economics, culture and human ecology, to comprehend this and to respond effectively. But then critical thinkers in these disciplines are also paralysed by their inability to relate their work to allied work in other disciplines, and by the precariousness of their own positions.

It is against this background that the contributions to *Cosmos & History* over the last twelve years, including this edition, gain their coherence. It is a collective effort to overcome this fragmentation and tunnel vision, to bring into question the defective state of current science and the dominant culture of modernity, to defend the humanities and to reveal alternative ways of thinking and knowing, reviving interest in neglected ideas and neglected thinkers and further advancing their work. Much of this work has focussed on the main fault line of the culture of modernity, the apparently irreconcilable differences between the scientific materialist world-view and the conception of humans promoted by the humanities. The challenge is to develop a conception of nature through which it is possible to make intelligible the full reality of life within nature, and through this, of human culture and consciousness, and to challenge entrenched ways of thinking that appear to have made this impossible. This is exemplified by the special editions of *Cosmos & History* on the foundations of mind and the review of efforts to deploy quantum theory to explain mind in this edition. Inspired directly or indirectly by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, a good deal of this quest has honed in on the question What is life? It is by answering the question What is life?, central to making mind and consciousness intelligible as part of nature, that it becomes possible to overcome the division between the sciences and the humanities and to align the sciences with the humanities. Not all contributions to the various editions of the journal have focussed on this question, although it is in terms of this quest to bridge the gap between science and the humanities by according a central place to the quest to understand life that their coherence begins to reveal itself.

Bridging the gap between science and the humanities is not simply a matter of dealing with this as an intellectual problem, however, and it is only by recognizing this that the full coherence of this journal becomes evident. Beyond this intellectual quest to understand life is the value accorded to life. As Nietzsche struggled heroically to reveal and then confront, we live in a nihilistic culture in which the highest values have devaluated themselves. Scientists had promoted a view of nature as bits of matter in motion moving endlessly, meaninglessly, and viewed living beings, including humans, as nothing but effects of this meaningless motion of matter, devaluing not only the quest for truth that supposedly underpins science, but more fundamentally, devaluing life itself. Nietzsche also showed that this was not the dispassionate view of reality it purported to be. It was the final and ultimate expression of resentment, a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred that cannot be satisfied, resulting in the will to power turning against itself.

It is this above all that is manifest in the order that technocrats are imposing on people, enslaving humanity to a globalized market dominated by corporate managers and media moguls, devaluing both nature and people and making it impossible to face up to and deal with the destruction of life that is beginning to match the great extinctions of the past. The theme that gives coherence to all editions of this journal, including the present edition, is that they are affirming life in opposition to a malevolent, life denying culture driven by the quest by its ruling elites for total domination of the world. This is the rationale for reviving speculative philosophy, for examining diverse cosmologies, philosophical systems and advances in science that were not nihilistic or are opposed to it, for examining witches' pacts with the devil to exert power over others in early modern Europe, foreshadowing the Faustian bargain of those who have embraced industrial capitalism and the global market as means to subjugate nature and people, for examining post-truth politics, reviving rhetoric as an alternative to instrumental rationality, and searching for good sense among people not dominated by modern Western civilization. It is also the rationale for rebelling against the subordination of communities and nations to the global market, the global corporatocracy and technocrats, and presenting alternative visions of the future. It is for this reason that this edition, with the diverse perspectives and issues taken up, has been labelled *Affirming Life*.