Philosophy and the Planetary

YUK HUI

ABSTRACT: This essay considers the pandemic as a consequence of the planetary condition. It goes on to ask: Can philosophy contribute to the elucidation of the planetary, or is philosophy, in the words of Heidegger, already completed *in* and *as* the planetary? What kind of relation to the planetary will it desire to have?

KEY WORDS: planetarization, pandemic, Heidegger, technology, planetary thinking

History is contingent: for example, in 2020, no one expected that it would not be possible to travel, to go on vacation, or even to go to the restaurants in one's neighbourhood. The world has been suspended for months from its "normal" operations and it will probably last for the year to come. Is it not astonishing that a bat, if the virus really comes from the bat in China, has been haunting the whole planet and has interrupted countless lives on the earth? However, the pandemic doesn't reveal anything about the bat, which remains a scapegoat, but rather the planetary, which is the culmination of the globalization process one has been talking about for decades, if not centuries when colonization is considered as one of its beginnings.

Even if the virus did come from the bat, there is still a misconfiguration of human and non-human relations, or a disturbance of multispecies harmony; and this disturbance can now no longer be localized to a species and to a country; on the contrary, it has become a planetary phenomenon. The 2003 SARS faded away on its own, because the logistics within China and between China and the rest of the world were still constrained. In 2020, the logistic situation has drastically changed; with high-speed trains and low price airlines, the virus escaped with uncontrollable speed.

It is probably the moment one can concretely experience the planetary condition of our epoch. How are we going to understand the planetary and the planetary condition? Can philosophy contribute to the elucidation of the planetary, or is

philosophy, in the words of Martin Heidegger, already completed *in* and *as* the planetary? If the pandemic stands as one of the outcomes of technological planetarization, it is necessary to ask, like Heidegger did, what is the task of philosophy after its end is announced and what kind of future relation to technology does it desire to have?

Heidegger's verdict on the end of philosophy has yet to be revisited for what concerns the relation between thinking and the planetary, but his attempt to identify the history of western philosophy with the history of technology, no matter how brutal and problematic it is, remains insightful and instrumental in reflecting on the possibility and impossibility of thinking in the post-metaphysical world. In other words, it is through this reformulation of Heidegger that technology becomes a truly essential question of philosophy. Therefore, if the planetary means to be the end of philosophy, it nevertheless constitutes the condition for thinking to come. Thinking cannot simply posit itself as a negation of the planetary, like an easy renouncement of technology and modernity, since at stake is not only re-conceptualization but also transformation. One could easily fall prey to the choices between spiritualism and materialism, as was the case in the past century. Instead, thinking will have to set out from the planetary and summon all its effort to go beyond it by transforming it.

Philosophy as an academic discipline will continue to exist if universities will be able to survive the technological disruption and neoliberal destructive creation of this century. Philosophy as the exercise of searching for truth may be rendered irrelevant since data science and information science will take over its task to reveal the true and the real, as is happening during the time of pandemic, when data reigns. Philosophy becomes the shadow figure of data science, like a supporting actor to Plato's cinema on Socrates. It became a sort of blunt and inept sceptic; its critique of biopolitics, population control, surveillance, etc., turn out to be discredited by being naïve and ignorant, if not cynical. As the technocrats claim at least, it is data that saves lives by tracking down the virus carriers, allows efficient coordination of logistics of goods, and proves to be essential for social policies and economic recoveries; philosophy, in contrast, has either to repeatedly compete with religion as a means of consolation or to become affirmative of technological planetarization, and that machines will finally have minds. Yet, besides these speculative exercises, probably nothing is more disturbing than the comparison that intensive surveillance and violation of privacy and freedom save lives, while the desire for liberty and democracy finally led to high death tolls and the resurgence of the extreme right.

This seems to be an embarrassing situation for philosophy, if not all disciplines in the humanities. If Heidegger is right with his claim that Western philosophy or metaphysics finds its completion in modern technology, today philosophy seems almost irrelevant to technological planetarization except those schools that are

close to natural sciences, for example, philosophy of mind, logic, and ethics, which could be instrumentalized by computation. Paradoxically, in the tech-conferences, there has been increasing concerns about the ethical use of artificial intelligence or the ethics of technology in general. New technological disruptions are accompanied by new ethical rules, for AI, for biotechnologies, etc. In discussions about the ethics of technology, people tend to first accept these technologies, and then provide measures to mitigate their harm or to find reasons to justify them. Surely, there are individual technologies serving this or that purpose, and it is possible to limit their input and output as well as the conditions of their use. But these ethics are rooted in a technological thinking, namely the planetary, that has already taken over. Without confronting this philosophical issue and providing a new framework, we will only pile on further ethical constraints until we confront a limit.

Ethics, which is considered to be a theoretical aspect of religion as opposed to dogma, its practical counterpart, becomes part of technology, which is to say that it is determined schematically and mathematically, like in the famous "trolley problem" of self-driving cars. The philosophy of technology becomes a discipline to propose policies that maintain certain "ethics" waiting to be violated sooner or later by the state and by capital. Heidegger's critique of the ethics of technological world remains valid today:

> By this conception of the totality of the technological world, we reduce everything down to man, and at best come to the point of calling for an ethics of the technological world. Caught up in this conception, we confirm our own opinion that technology is of man's making alone. We fail to hear the claim of Being which speaks in the essence of technology.[1]

The "ethics of the technological world" is also an affirmation of humanism, or technologies, which are far too human. And it is in this sense that technological planetarization has been understood only as the extension of man, like the noosphere developed by Vladimir Vernadsky and more substantially the Jesuit palaeontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Now, it is appropriated by transhumanism under different titles: human enhancement, geoengineering, and exploration of Mars. If one can agree with the point that the pandemic is nothing natural but artificial, in the sense that it is one of the direct consequences of technological modernization, which appropriates everything within the reach of the human desire, then it seems that philosophy's lack of understanding and engagement with technology is exactly what renders it incompetent. Philosophy risks (if it has not already) receding to total silence, or in Heidegger's own words, to the complete absence of questioning.

In so far as we consider the planetary as the end of Western European philosophy—as Heidegger said, "the European is the precursor to the planetary [*Vorform des Planetarischen*]"[2]—we actually only address one part of planet earth and a

rather limited set of epistemologies. His announcement of the end of philosophy can also be read as an invitation to consider what we might call a post-European philosophy. To go beyond planetarization is therefore also an attempt to go beyond philosophy. Will non-European philosophy provide another exit out of modernity? During the pandemic, I received many requests to comment on the philosophical ideas behind the effective measures against the pandemic in Asia, which was often simplified into the comparison of the West being individualistic and the East being collective. However, this has little, if not nothing, to do with philosophy.

In order to address a post-European philosophy, the task is no longer simply about diversifying the teaching of thoughts in the university system—though it remains fundamental and necessary. What seems to be even more fundamental as a task is to reinvent these thoughts in face of the ever accelerating technological world.[3] Without this capacity to reflect on itself and to reflect on its condition of being, hence to reinvent itself as a transformative power, we will never arrive at a post-European philosophy. If we take East Asia as an example, despite the great efforts in preserving Confucianist, Daoist, and Buddhist thought and comparing the East and the West, we have not yet succeeded in moving towards what a post-European philosophy means to be. Both the Kyoto school in Japan and the New Confucianism in China don't seem to have succeeded in doing so because the question of technology was not adequately reflected upon.[4] All these thoughts find themselves helpless in the face of the technological world because the material and technological transformation makes the spirit a stranger to its own creations; and also because of this embarrassment, it suddenly becomes an imperative to talk about artificial intelligence even without really understanding the subject.

The pandemic could serve as an *epochē* in the sense of phenomenology, or maybe this suspension will only start much later. The planetary reveals itself as a gigantic force, which is both danger and hope. It remains the task of thinking to analyse it and develop an intimate relation with it. Thinking has to become a *planetary thinking*, one that takes the planetary as its own condition and exposes its limits; maybe only from there, thinking will be able to exhibit itself as a transformative power on and through technology, to *reframe* the *enframing* (*Gestell*), the essence of modern technology according to Heidegger.

Notes

1. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 34.
2. Heidegger, *GA 71 Das Ereignis*, 95.
3. See Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, chapter 5.
4. See the analysis in Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*.

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