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H. Hashi, Human Thinking in the Corona Pandemic

# Human Thinking in the Corona Pandemic – A Philosophical Report from Europe

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Key words:

1. Corona Pandemic in Europe, 2. University education via distance / remote learning, 3. Changing trends in Philosophy, 4. Problem of fundamental logic, 5. Orientation toward enhancement

A remarkable feature of the global pandemic is that people in all countries are able to address, by means of digital communication, the same problem in *real time*. We may observe a similar situation in regard to climate change, ecologic crises, and mega-catastrophes. Reflecting on these circumstances, it may be noted that our mutual problems should be approached by means of discussion aimed at yielding not only an accurate assessment of a given situation but also the power to carefully think about and take action on the problem in philosophy at just this moment in time.

## *1. Tendencies in the world of sciences and education*

At the University of Vienna and the Polish Academy of Sciences where I teach, in accordance with the restrictions imposed by the second lockdown, all courses had to be held online,[1] deepening the divide between participants' abilities to use digital technology. The advantages and disadvantages of online learning soon became evident. The students who took a deep interest in their courses were able to act with a greater degree of autonomy and were able to effectively plan their schedule. Those lacking the necessary self-control and unable to establish this self-directed, dynamic mode of daily life experienced the disintegration of their working routine in an atmosphere of ennui or decadence.

Furthermore, a remarkable change took place: scientists and intellectuals had, *before the pandemic*, been oriented toward compiling the *latest information* in their particular fields for presentation to the public. *Through* the escalation of the pandemic, *almost everyone received new information directly as it appeared in real time* via digital media; yet the latest piece of information is *never really* the latest and the believable one, because a further news streams accompanied by another aspect. The previous criterion – *when, where, and by whom* the latest discovery was made – has been replaced. We now ask: How can we process a new piece of information provided by a primary source in order *to construct new knowledge*? An intensified reflection is needed: How does this information express a novel problem and how can we deal with it in order to find a solution?

In the past decade, thinkers and intellectuals have tended to collect new data in the course of a given scientific inquiry. After the pandemic swept across the world, this criterion receded into the

background. Instead, the ability to grasp the *relationship* between one kind of knowledge and another has become fundamental: the interaction of knowledge and cognition is now oriented toward constructing a network of relations connecting one's own knowledge with that of others. This emerging criterion may be described as *the logic of relationships* within society.

### *2. Society of total digitalization*

In the midst of the pandemic, human beings find themselves in a situation where everyone has to continue meeting their daily needs while being in danger of infection. Robotic and artificial intelligence (AI) systems continue to be rapidly developed,[2] and yet, during the pandemic, it is evident to everyone that *neither* a robot *nor* an AI can do our breathing for us. Automated external defibrillators (AED) are available in many railway stations—nonetheless, this device cannot be used to save one's own life; its use depends on another human being, someone able to discern an emergency and take immediate action.

Total digitalization is one of the goals promoted by the governments of Europe as well as East Asia. In the context of data administration, performance will surely become enhanced. However, in regard to the human being as a whole, as a breathing and acting individual, total digitalization is not problem-free. In the field of university education it has become evident that the greater the effort to digitize everything, the more apparent the gaps in individual performance. Being human means being part of an aggregate, a complex system. This system can be thought of *deterministically,* that is, from a digital point of view, as well as indeterministically, as an analog system. Reality emerges within this *topos*; a human being is not like a robot or an AI.

### *3. What can we grasp in philosophy?*

In the past two decades, there has been a worldwide tendency for philosophy, that is, as a pure metaphysics or ontology (which was previously acknowledged as system of critical, reflexive thought), to become less relevant. Analytic philosophy, mainly developed by British and American scholars, has become the dominant approach. Upon this basis, the fields of cognitive science and philosophy of science focus on the philosophy of robotics and artificial intelligence. However, in continental philosophy, phenomenology has been a well-developed discipline for decades. Ethics and social philosophy form the other core disciplines of continental philosophy. Philosophy deals with ever more topics related to the specific problems and features found in contemporary human society.

We may also observe another tendency in the past decade: philosophers have focused on textual commentary and interpretation. Among the flood of digital information, writings about new topics appear every minute—commentaries and terminological interpretations alone may take up all of one's time. A comment on part of a text is made, followed by a comment on some other detail. Many

philosophers spend most of their careers as highly specialized commentators. Their works consist almost entirely of commentaries and interpretations. Can we really call this philosophy? If so, then philosophy has metamorphosed into textual commentary. "*Quo vadis, philosophia*"—a question worthy of serious consideration in the early decades of this century.

Considering this tendency, we encounter a problem central to philosophy in the Western world. Philosophy has been characterized, beginning with Aristotle, by a preference for scientific thinking. *Philosophia prima* had its starting point the sense of wonder evoked by discovering some truth of reality. This wonder enables the thinker to question why the phenomenon in question is recognized as a truth. Questioning the causality of that truth and arguing for its justification promoted this sort of genealogical thinking in philosophy. The ancient collegia of philosophers were based on the spirit of the logos's scientific activity. This enabled the development of the natural sciences and the formulation of scientific theories; this approach is preserved in the modern era in the form of analytic philosophy and cognitive science.

However, in full acknowledgement of these historical facts, a number of questions nonetheless remain: The passion for analysis and logic *is not accompanied* by an ethos of compassion for human life. Within the discursive framework which has come to define research, namely the task of proving what is right and what is wrong, *the thinking and judging I/self* is taken as a fundamental premise, enshrined as an authority and freed from all doubt. Since the Cartesian *cogito* is largely accepted in Western philosophy, a thinking subject acts within this principal framework by default: *one's own ego* is incorporated into the topic at hand with little self-critical reflection. An ego bounded by the limitations of one's subjectivism is identified with the principal category of the thinking self/I/ego, proven and justified by the free will of the empirically minded thinking subject. We are confronted here with a logic that is remarkably erroneous: The thinking *subject* confounds the *pure theoretical self/I/ego* with his own *empirical, personal and individual* "I" as an egoistic self. The two different types of "I" / "Self" are mixed and justified as a "true self": *a self-contradiction* accepted by many unquestioningly.

### *4. The core of the problematic*

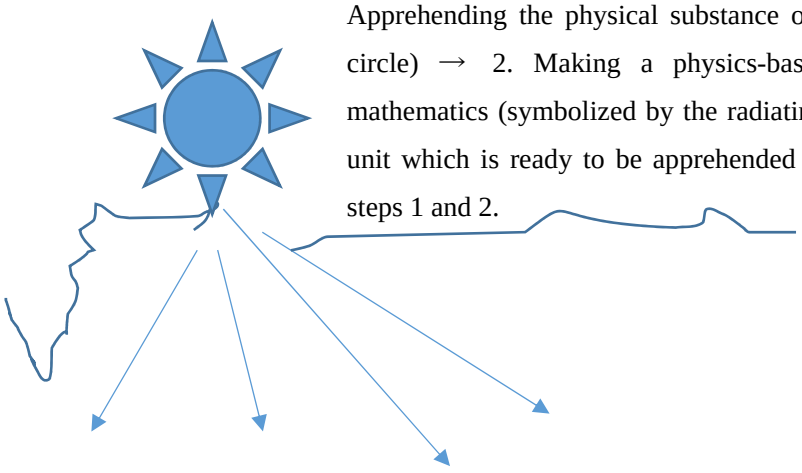
Thomas Metzinger commented on one of the fundamental characteristics of the natural sciences coupled with technological development:[3] 'History has shown that people, in their thirst for knowledge, do not like to think about ethical questions at all, and thus also not about ethical consequences, because their primary concern is to simply show that [the new technology] works.'

Here we plainly see the essential problem in the logic of the development of the natural and technological sciences. A self-critical reflection directed against this fundamental tendency is needed, the tendency typical of physicalism and techno-centrism or IT-absolutism. The assertions of these isms are in any case decidedly modern and incorporate newly discovered information and novel

terminologies. Their conclusions are always logical and free of mistakes. Yet, the literature, comments, and interpretations they produce are often based on the *affirmation* of physics and the technological and computer sciences with the premise that these are the most objective, the universally valid sciences. Gödel's incompleteness theorem states that a given scientific system will always possess some fundamental principles that cannot be proven with that system itself, yet the proponents of physicalism and techno-centrism build their theories on the fundamental affirmation of their own theses, which leaves little space for self-critical reflection, for *philosophical doubt* whether and to what extent this position is all-encompassing, dominating all other theories of science, ethics and culture.

It is well known that the fundamental way of thinking in modern science was originally advanced and defended by Descartes. We may philosophically express it as the *cogito* of the scientifically thinking I/self. In the natural sciences the basic model of thinking is manifested in the three steps of the following process: 1. establishing an initial model of the object of research, 2. constructing a principle that accounts for the essence of the object of research, and 3. finding a mathematical theorem or formula that apprehends this essence as a systematic unity. Even if the forgoing seems to be somewhat simplified, it is by means of scientific thinking that one searches for and grasps new knowledge—this is a key principle that enables the further construction of a mathematical system and of a manner of deduction that is based on physics.

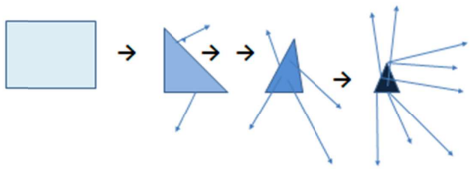
The core of this overarching general theory is formed by the following preparatory steps: 1. Apprehending the physical substance of the object (symbolized by the center circle) → 2. Making a physics-based deduction via the application of mathematics (symbolized by the radiating marks) → 3. Yielding a constructed unit which is ready to be apprehended and realized as a whole resulting from steps 1 and 2.



When the discovery of new knowledge is successfully incorporated into a new theory, it should be linked to other information in a digital network spanning the world. The arrows in the above diagram symbolize the possibility of connecting with other researchers and their theories in the networked digital world: step 4 is the dissemination of new information with the intention of constructing a new network.

Day by day, we live our lives within this model of a digitally linked world where natural scientists,

technology experts (including the field of genetic technology) tend to receive more information and knowledge by connecting with more databases and data stations. This is also the fundamental condition for the development of irrefutable scientific knowledge. Yet, on the other hand, this way of scientific development possesses a fatal flaw, this manner of objective thinking proceeds dualistically: something is either right or wrong, correct or incorrect, certain or uncertain, etc. The world of an objective judge is always divided in a dualistic manner whereby only one half of it, *judged as* "true, correct or certain," is accepted and forms the basis for further deductions. The other half, judged as wrong, incorrect, and uncertain, would be isolated and cut off. If the whole world of human beings consists only of scientific knowledge, then this intensification of scientism is free of mistakes—within the framework of the sciences themselves. Yet, the world of human beings is not only constituted by the sciences, but also by ethics and culture. Considered philosophically, the dimensions that are cut off by scientific thinking and techno-centrism (including human feeling) constitute a massive aggregate which is ignored by reason and insight.



The above diagram may be simplified, yet it illustrates a basic characteristic of scientism and digital tech-absolutism. The manner of thinking outlined thus far works exceptionally well in the context of a dualism whereby anything that is judged as "wrong, incorrect, and uncertain" is cut off and discarded. With every step in the process of scientific thinking the content forming the basis for further deduction will be ever more intensely treated, giving rise to an ever-larger cut-off dimension. This enables progress in accordance with the intensification of scientific interest while the physical dimensions of a database, i.e. information ordered by integrated circuits on semi-conductor decreases in volume. On the other hand, this kind of explicit, concentrated knowledge as *information* produces an effect akin to that of a centralized hub of information that organizes many other kinds of knowledge while remaining dominant. This is similar to constructing and developing a network; This expansion is similar to the way that the digital network envelopes our contemporary world, advanced by the dominant digital powers.

### *5. How does this kind of progress fail?*

The expansion of the scientific information network in this manner, along with its fundamental character, takes as its axiom: *knowledge has the power to enable everything*. The scientific logos with its pathos of seeking can develop endlessly, as for instance, the development of genetic technology in our time. And yet this pathos cannot be coupled with an ethos that enables human insight into thinking and acting with compassion. In the present day, several key concepts, such as *computation* and *algorithm*, seem to lead the sciences as well as mass media in a globalized world. Yet we ignore the fact that these concepts concretize knowledge into discrete units of information, reducing human life to functions resembling digitized information. The one-sided obsession with attaining an all-encompassing logos tends toward the absolutisation of logos because an ethos of mutual consideration for oneself as well as for others is lacking. The reason for this one-sided radical progress of logos-centrism is that a thinking subject *unconsciously* posits his own ego as a *central* starting point before beginning any process of thinking. Scientific logos has obviously achieved one of the most important advancements in human development worldwide. Without its remarkable performance there would be neither computers nor digital networks. At the same time, this world requires another logic, one which is open to our *fundamental field of life*: We must view the basic dimension of human suffering along with the ecological environment with rigorous logic and clear insight. The latter is integrated with feeling and compassion. A transformation of philosophy is required—a transformation toward **The Logic of the Field** and **The Field of Between,** where the personal existence of the thinking and acting subject as an ***egoless self*** forms the growing core of a co-existential world day by day. Additional explanations of this position will be addressed in a further work.

## Endnotes

[1] https://www.univie.ac.at/ueber-uns/weitere-informationen/coronavirus, since March 11th 2020 with updates

[2] https://ucris.univie.ac.at u:cris Portal - Research at the University of Vienna

[3] Metzinger, Thomas: on the TV program „Mythos Frankenstein. Die Grenzen wissenschaftlichen Strebens / Terra X, ZDF. 2017. – The original: „Die Geschichte hat gezeigt, dass Menschen in ihrem Wissensdrang gar nicht so gern an die ethischen Fragen denken und damit auch nicht an die ethischen Konsequenzen, weil es ihnen zuerst einmal darum geht, zu zeigen, dass das [– was sie vorhaben –] überhaupt funktioniert“. (Metzinger, 2017, min 16:54) https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/terra-x/mythos-frankenstein-100.html

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# コロナ・パンデミックにおける人間の思考 ― 欧州・思想界からの発信

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キイワード　1.コロナ禍での欧州からの発信 2. デジタル化大学教育の現状　3. 現地の学究界と研究動向
4. 現地の思想・哲学全般に内在する問題　5.グローバル世界における論理改革への展望

マスメディアでは、地球全域が「コロナ禍」で一つの話題をリアルタイムで共有。IT ネットワーク、各人の端末で情報のやりとりが多次元化し、「グローバル世界」は実感を伴う一つの世界となった。欧州現地の思想界を展望すると―

**a)　学究界はそこに何を読み取るのか**

IT 情報網の拡大と分化に伴い、先端の専門研究は細分化する傾向が過去 20 年近く続いた。が、感染症拡大の危機に来て様相は一変。先端の研究促進を支える地球社会では「昨日までの常識」が通用しない。情報自体は全般、IT 情報網がある限り「あって普通」。希少価値は既に無い。個々の研究の社会全体にしめる位置・各人の担当分野と社会全体とのかかわりに注目せざるを得ない状況になっている。

**b)　大学教育の動向**

＜先端のロボットや人工知能 AI の開発、デジタル化で全面変容する社会＞等がコロナ以前は話題の中心だった。が、コロナ禍を経た今、人間が人間自身を見つめ、命の根本と向き合わざるを得ない日々が日常化する。AI は各人の呼吸は代行してくれず、AED 救命機器をとっさの場合に活用するのは人間である。私の奉職するウィーン大学でも、2020 年 3 月から 2021 年 7 月まで全国の大学が一斉閉校しオンライン教科に移行した。2021 年 10 月以降はハイブリッド（対面授業のオンライン接続、受講者へのライヴ並びに録画配信）方式が打ち出されるも、受講者らの実力と成績の格差は拡大しており、喪失感を抱く者は多い。災禍によって「大学教育とは何か。学業の本領をどう全うするのか」？ 本質的な問いかけが即今、日常生活の現場で展開され成果が問われる時代になった。

**c) 哲学・思想界は何を追究するのか**

既存の純哲学はこの十年来下火となり、IT 工学や人工知能をめぐる思想、気候変動をめぐる公共社会の哲学・倫理等、プラグマティックな領域が多くなっている。が、その多くは膨大化する情報の収集と各界先端の研究成果を追跡しコメントを加えるだけに終始。情報に圧倒され攪乱され、人間自らがネットワークの端末と化す今、哲学はまさにこの日常底から問題を提起すべきであろう。人間性喪失の危機に対し、人間はその思考と叡智を駆使しつつどう対処するのか。本論では、現今の欧州の思想・哲学界に内在する問題を具体的に考察し、論理改革への方向性を展望する。