

# DEEP OBSERVATION

## Toward a Philosophy of the Space Station

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Classical philosophy of technology begins with the suggestive hypothesis that technological “devices” are essentially extensions of organs, allowing users of such devices to broaden the range of their senses and extremities. Thus the telephone increases our ability to hear to a marvelous degree, and shoes, streets, and automobiles dramatically augment our potential to move with our feet and legs. Hence one can speak of technology, in sum, as a dimension of the extension of man<sup>1</sup> – in which case the human being is imagined to be the ensemble of his or her organs, and technology the sum of prostheses, or functional extensions that aim to improve those organs. Homo sapiens would accordingly be the technological animal that from the beginning has sought to expand the radius of its action and to optimize its prosthetic organs.

At first sight, it might seem as if astronautics, as it developed beginning in the mid twentieth century, strongly confirms the validity of this approach. Anyone looking for new evidence to support this expansionist and extensionist theory of the human being might well find the reality of space travel to be quite impressive corroboration. From the beginning, human beings have been on the verge of bursting the age-old bonds that have tied them to the Earth and expanding their range of action into the realm of perigean outer space and beyond. Where else would human beings operate more “extensively” than in their expeditions into the universe? Where else would human beings more impressively realize their sensory and kinetic potential?

Yet if we look a little closer, we realize that space travel is much more than merely further proof that human organs can be expanded. The theory of organ-extension is no longer quite so plausible when we realize that the engineers of spacecraft and space stations, who consider perigean outer space to be a possible and actual site for human beings to dwell in, do not merely broaden the scope of our sensory endowment and of our kinetic range, although such broadening does occur. Rather, they create artificial islands in the universe that are designed to accommodate various inhabitants arriving from Earth, at least for a while. We immediately recognize why this is much more than merely the expansion of perception and movement on grander scales.

In fact, the creation of space stations represents a dramatic break in the history of human self-relation, provided we grant that perceptions of the environment and

instances of self-knowledge converge in the human being. Indeed, as the history of ideas demonstrates, from time immemorial human beings have tended to soar above their natural state on the wings of idealistic evasion, yet modern anthropological thought has shown that they always require inclusion in a sphere that can sustain them, regardless of whether they are relatively emancipated from a given environment. Indeed, humans not only require a cultural sphere, as is to be expected for members of the symbolic species<sup>2</sup>, but also need to be connected to a natural sphere that permanently assures their vital functions.

Life's absolute dependence on a suitable environment is most obvious where there is no such environment – in outer space. Anyone who wishes to travel there has to bring their own environment along with them, if they would like to be able to reside somewhere. Although this might seem trivial at first, it nevertheless has far-reaching philosophical and anthropological implications. With space travel, humanity emerges from a stage in which the self is experienced through extension and expansion, and enters one in which it is experienced through transplantation and implantation. In the course of such a transition, organs are not transplanted from one body into another, as they have been in recent surgical practice. Rather, in the construction of space stations, we are confronted with ontological implants and transplants – that is, with the implantation of a world where there was previously nothing and with the transplantation of a suitable living environment for human beings into an external world-container. It is fair to say that, with these procedures, the art of constructing prostheses is spurred beyond the stage of replacing and extending organs to one in which the world is replaced and the environment extended.

Against this backdrop, we can philosophically articulate the space station's significance in the light of "world history." As soon as terrestrial human beings are able to install implants in the void of outer space and fill these implants with transplanted environments, they are also able to relocate temporarily to these off-center imitations of world and environment and to enter into a kind of ontological communication with those who have been relocated. If Martin Heidegger, in his epochal work *Being and Time* (1927), interpreted the human being's fundamental disposition as being-in-the-world, a philosopher on board a space station would accordingly speak of being-in-the-world 2. Through the actual construction of such a station, a hidden premise of being-in-the-world 1 becomes explicit: namely, the assumption that the Earth is the only possible site for accommodating the existence of those who inhabit technologically and symbolically produced world-constructs. As soon as the space station exists, the Earth ceases to have a monopoly on supporting environmental and cultural encasements. From now

on, it must share this privilege with what has been implanted in outer space, even if this only requires an infinitesimal extension, measured in terms of the Earth's volume. What is called nature or the environment in being-in-the-world 1 is replicated by the space station's life support system<sup>3</sup> in being-in-the-world 2.

With the emergence of the space station, not only do we have proof that there is intelligent life outside Earth, but the ability to communicate with this external intelligence is also effectively demonstrated by the electronic transmission of data between station and Earth. In fact, this has world-historical consequences, since Earth-based worlds (which are also called cultures) can for the first time view a really existing shared world beyond. From now on, we are faced with a transcendence that Earthlings have themselves accomplished, and that can be distinguished from traditional, symbolically coded religious or metaphysical instances of transcendence by its allowing for reliable two-way communication. The metaphysical asymmetry between divine transcendence and terrestrial participation in such transcendence is replaced by the positional asymmetry between the space station and ground control. Under such an arrangement, the ability to hear voices from on high no longer has any ecstatic implications. It can thus be said that space travel has discovered the most elegant solution to the oldest metaphysical problem: it has solved the riddle of the ontological discontinuity between above and below by positing a continuum between being-in-the-world 1 and being-in-the-world 2. This is hardly speculation, and can be confirmed by what we already know with certainty on a practical level.

Even more important, however, is that the same intelligence regime prevails above and below in the new two-way transcendence. Thus the crew below can immediately take the crew above at their word, namely because the latter's view of Earth has the advantage of an off-center position, yet remains embedded in the same ontological continuum – the positions in this continuum are in principle reversible, in contrast to religious transcendence. If I am speaking with God, I am praying. If God speaks to me in a booming voice, I am schizophrenic. In contrast, if I hear Thomas Reiter or Hans Schlegel speaking German in outer space, I can conclude that all systems on board are running smoothly. Likewise, I can adopt the astronaut's view of the world, because, as noted, the perspectives in the ontological continuum are interchangeable – and even more importantly: there is a coherence of intelligence. What the astronauts know, see, and feel is also something that I can know, see, and feel for myself. If our witness up there, a rather matter-of-fact man, let us assume, is not able to conceal how deeply moved he is by the planet's phenomenal unity when he looks down on Earth, then his emotion is also valid for me.

At this point, the world-historical significance of manned space travel in the

perigean realm has at least been suggestively outlined. Its implications are literally immeasurable, insofar as space travel dramatically enhances the human being's position on a globalized planet. It offers proof that technology has set a civilizing process in motion that will lead far beyond anything that might be established by cross-cultural and interfaith dialogues. While the advocates of monotheism will spend the next hundred years arguing over the convergences and divergences of their systems, astronautics has already provided a pragmatic form of universal transcendence, which orbits all Earth-based life forms and belief systems from an equal distance and surveys them equitably.

To understand this, we must remember that the fabrication or revelation of the gods in early Asian and Mesopotamian cultures served an extremely important psycho-political goal. The gods above came into circulation when human beings grew accustomed to thinking that their lives were continually being observed by an intelligence that was as all-knowing as it was all-watching, an intelligence that also had the power to present everyone with the moral balance of their activity post mortem. Every advanced culture is based on the idea that an external observing intelligence exists that is able to comprehend all life processes synchronously, even those that hide away in the darkness of ignorance or ill will.

The elevation of a divine observing intelligence is accompanied by the corresponding figure of an observed intelligence – since antiquity this has been called the soul or, in somewhat more modern terms, a conscience. To have a conscience means to know that one is observed from a deep off-center position and pervaded by it. God is traditionally a deep observer, for whom all facts lie on the same surface. He sees everything synchronously and from all sides, whether they are above or within. Incidentally, if the modern world has curbed religion, this is not least because individuals have reclaimed a right to privacy – that is, a form of the world in which even God, if there is a God, may only enter after receiving permission.

As to observation from above, space travel has obviously assumed at least this much of divine activity and transferred it to technological systems (observation satellites) and natural intelligence (human beings on board space stations). This act of transference partially explains their significance, which will last for centuries. Human entrusting of its off-center observation to its own intelligence based in outer space has allowed us to succeed in representing the external partner of conscience, overwhelmingly with technological means. This yields results that cannot continue to be entirely ignored for long. Education, both today and in future, aims to cultivate an awareness of the world that can in fact only develop if the authority of off-center observation is deep enough to be able to form a counterbalance to the egocentricity of local interests. Space travel thus attains a significance that can only be compared

to that of the drama in which gods emerged, three or four thousand years ago, throughout the first regional empires.

Human beings in the global age are again looking up at the nighttime sky. However, they do not merely believe that they are being observed, they know it, and in taking this knowledge seriously they become capable of acting as their conscience dictates. The images that our deep observer sends us speak a clear language. They speak to our conscience regarding the Earth. The unconscionable, however, must know that their lack of a conscience is already visible from outer space. Such images of the unconscionable can justifiably be presented as incriminating evidence in a trial against those who still wish to know nothing.

<sup>1</sup> 1. [Tr. – “extension of man” is in English in the original.]

<sup>2</sup> 2. [Tr. – “symbolic species” is in English in the original.]

<sup>3</sup> 3. [Tr. – “life support system” is in English in the original.]